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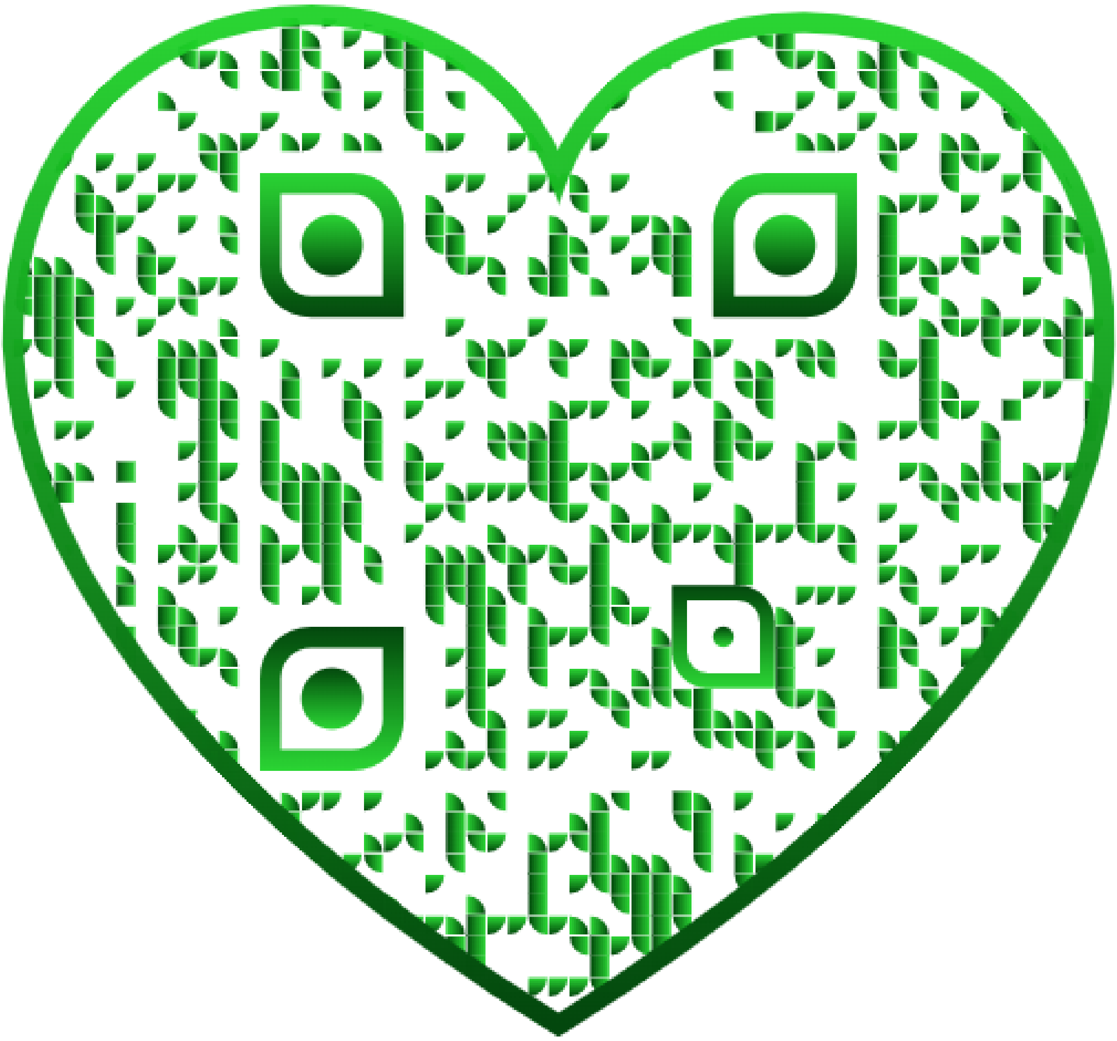

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Orkney uncovered
Cosy Cornwall
Coastal strolls, harbour towns & timeless inns

Cover image: The enigmatic stones at Stonehenge continue to guard their secrets
© English Heritage Trust

PHOTO: © PETER SCHOLEY/ALLAMY

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Wirksworth, Derbyshire Dales

EDITOR'S LETTER

If I had to sum up this issue in a single word, it would be 'cosy'. In winter, that's the perfect way to describe the Derbyshire Dales – a timeless landscape of quaint market towns, creaky old bookshops and generous helpings of the local speciality, Bakewell pudding *(p14)*.

At the other end of England, we find Cornwall equally enchanting in the colder months – a place of festive traditions, illuminated gardens and twinkly harbourside pubs *(p45)*.

With the nights drawing in, few things feel more comforting than the Shipping Forecast. This much-loved radio broadcast, now marking its centenary, is the very sound of Britain at rest. On *p67*, we explore its origins and consider why it remains so firmly anchored in our national consciousness.

Elsewhere in the issue, we experience the magic of the winter solstice at Stonehenge *(p24)*, take a nostalgic ride through Britain by heritage rail *(p58)*, uncover the ancient wonders of Orkney *(p72)*, and enjoy a little festive shopping in London's most historic stores *(p30)*.

And if all that doesn't spell cosiness, why not put the kettle on and curl up in an armchair with your favourite magazine? It's the very essence of winter warmth. Enjoy the issue!

Natasha

Natasha Foges, Editor

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67 **RADIO WAVES** For 100 years the Shipping Forecast broadcast has kept seafarers from peril on the sea

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PHOTOS: © ALAN COPSON/AWL IMAGES/JOHN CHASE/LONDON MUSEUM/CHRIS PARRY/
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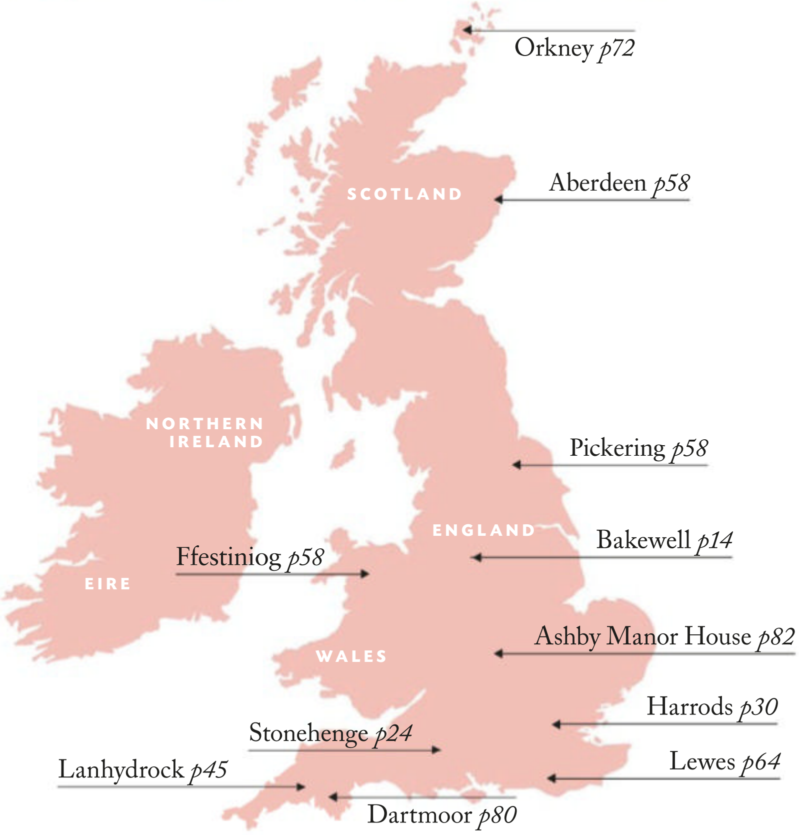
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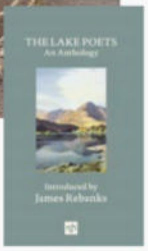
YOUR LETTERS

Write to us with your thoughts on the magazine and memories of Britain

STAR LETTER CHIVALRY IN THE COTSWOLDS

Your last issue [Vol 93 Issue 4] mentioned taking the train to the market town of Moreton-in-Marsh. My husband and I did just that in June on our visit to the Cotswolds! After arriving by train and checking into our inn, we took a stroll up and down the High Street to get a feel for the town. The window of an antique shop caught our eye, so we stopped to peek inside. A friendly English couple around our age stopped, too. They told us that this was their first holiday to the Cotswolds and then shared their plans for the next day, as did we. When we eventually parted ways, the gentleman shook my husband's hand and then took mine. Bowing ever so gallantly, he kissed the top of my hand. What a lovely surprise! That warm gesture from an English gentleman was a highlight of my Cotswold visit. Sir, if you are reading this, again I say, "Thanks for the memory!"

Peggy Maurer, Castro Valley, California, USA



Our star letter wins a copy of *The Lake Poets: An Anthology*, with an introduction by James Rebanks (£15.99), a beautifully produced book of poems and extracts from the poets' letters and journals. Available from all good bookshops and from *nottinghilleditions.com*.

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QUICK QUIZ

Put the kettle on – it's quiz time! The answers can all be found in this issue of *BRITAIN* (as well as below).

① Which historic London shop supplied scotch eggs to Winston Churchill on the Western Front?

② What is the word for a person who searches for treasure on the banks of the Thames?

③ Which beloved radio programme has been keeping sailors informed (and lulling landlubbers to sleep) for 100 years?

ANSWERS: 1. Fortnum & Mason **2.** A mudlark **3.** The Shipping Forecast

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THE WYE ON SCREEN

I was very interested in the article 'Wye oh Wye' [Vol 93 Issue 4]. Do you know that Chepstow Castle was used as the 'village' in the Monty Python movie *Jabberwocky*? I visited Chepstow after I saw the movie which was very interesting!

Maureen Donn, Owings, Maryland, USA

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PR63+ NGC
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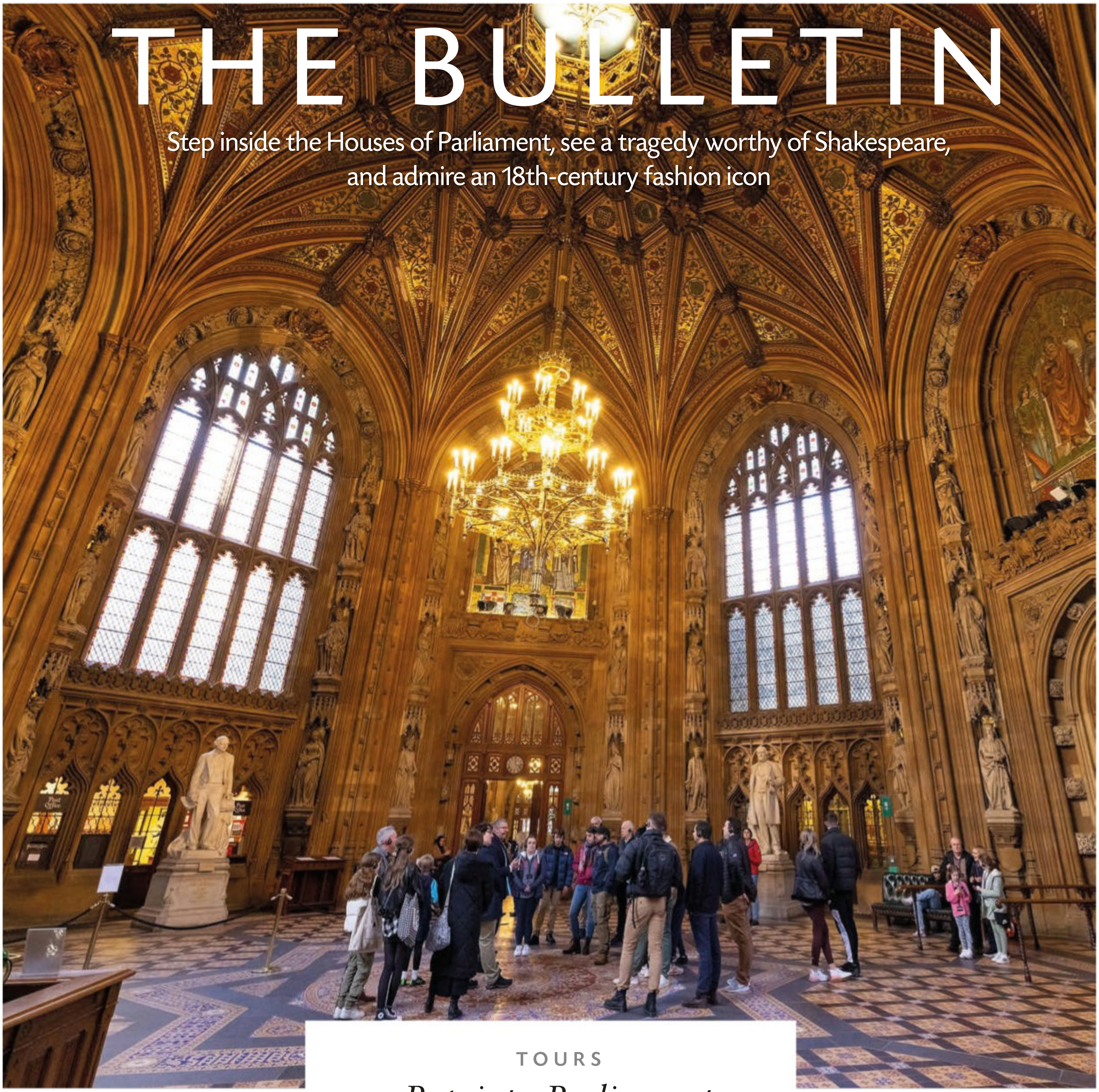

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TOURS

Pop into Parliament

Ever wondered what it's really like to be a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons? Or what the King has to do when he opens Parliament? A guided tour of the Houses of Parliament provides a rare insight into the workings of our government, its turbulent history, and the role that it plays today. See the spot where Guy Fawkes was hung, drawn and quartered, and where King Charles I was sentenced to death, and take in the building's extraordinary architecture and fine art collection. Learn about the eccentric traditions that still take place today, and admire the glittering interiors of Westminster Palace, and the woes and wants of all the royals and rogues that have walked its halls.

parliament.uk/visiting

OPENING

Capturing the castle

The historic keep originally commissioned by William the Conqueror at Norwich Castle has reopened its doors to visitors after a multi-million-pound redevelopment. The mighty Grade I-listed stone keep was finished by King William I's son, Henry I, in 1121 and was once one of the most splendid palaces in medieval Europe. For the first time in its 900-year history visitors will be able to access all five floors of the keep, from the basement to the battlements, which offer spectacular views of the city. Don't miss the new Gallery of Medieval Life, developed in partnership with the British Museum, which displays more than 900 extraordinary medieval artefacts that tell the fascinating stories of those who lived in the period. *norwichcastle.norfolk.gov.uk*

FILM

The Bard on screen

Winter is the perfect time to cosy up, forget the world around you and step back in time with some gripping historical fiction, so film fans will be pleased to hear that the new adaptation of Maggie O'Farrell's award-winning novel, *Hamnet*, is soon to be released in cinemas (US 27 November, UK 9 January). A fictional reimagining of Shakespeare's inspiration for *Hamlet*, it tells the tragic story of Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, who in real life died aged just 11. Exploring the relationship between the ambitious playwright pursuing his career in London and his wife, left behind in Stratford-upon-Avon, the film stars Paul Mescal as William Shakespeare and Jessie Buckley as his wife, Agnes, whom history has always known as Anne Hathaway. Expect heart-wrenching drama and stellar acting, set in an authentically recreated Elizabethan England: a moving glimpse into the life and motivations of our greatest ever playwright.

HERITAGE

Under the apple tree

An archeological dig at the site of the house that was once built for Isaac Newton's mother, Hannah Newton, has uncovered remarkable treasures that tell of everyday life in the Newton household. The house, now demolished, stood in a field next door to Woolsthorpe Manor, Lincolnshire, where the polymath was born in 1643 – also the site of the famous apple tree that inspired the scientist's work on gravity. National Trust archeologists, helped by volunteers and local families, were searching for the exact location of Hannah's house when they dug up precious artefacts that may have been used by the Newton family, including a fragment of a 17th-century Bellarmine jug, decorative Staffordshire slipware, gaming tokens and thimbles. Visitors can now see the site of the dig on a visit to Woolsthorpe Manor, as excavations continue. *nationaltrust.org.uk/woolsthorpe*

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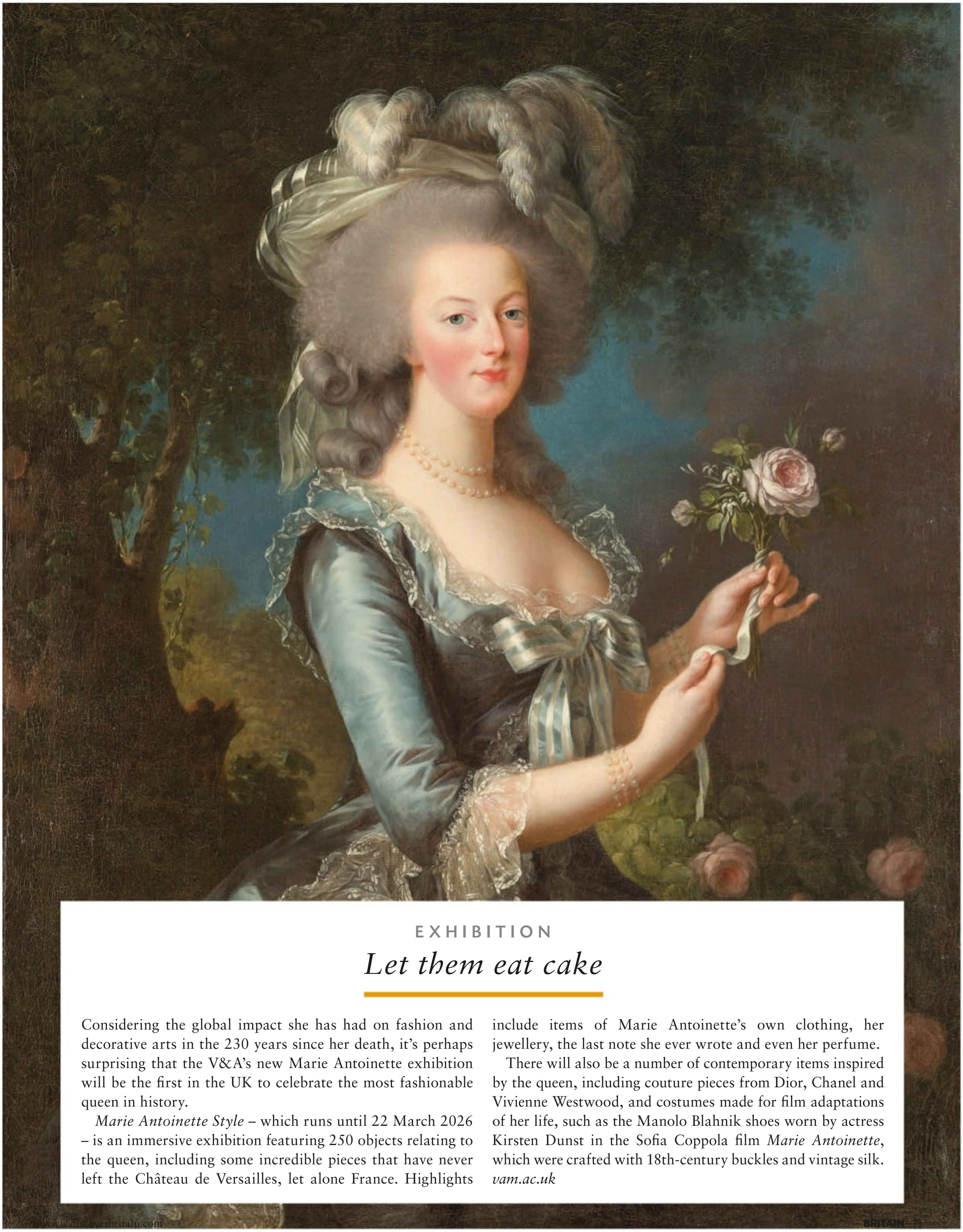

EXHIBITION

Let them eat cake

Considering the global impact she has had on fashion and decorative arts in the 230 years since her death, it's perhaps surprising that the V&A's new Marie Antoinette exhibition will be the first in the UK to celebrate the most fashionable queen in history.

Marie Antoinette Style – which runs until 22 March 2026 – is an immersive exhibition featuring 250 objects relating to the queen, including some incredible pieces that have never left the Château de Versailles, let alone France. Highlights include items of Marie Antoinette's own clothing, her jewellery, the last note she ever wrote and even her perfume.

There will also be a number of contemporary items inspired by the queen, including couture pieces from Dior, Chanel and Vivienne Westwood, and costumes made for film adaptations of her life, such as the Manolo Blahnik shoes worn by actress Kirsten Dunst in the Sofia Coppola film *Marie Antoinette*, which were crafted with 18th-century buckles and vintage silk. *vam.ac.uk*

This tasty treat is a delicious take on an ancient Hogmanay tradition

RECIPE

First-foot coal

The newest book from native Highlander and MasterChef finalist Sarah Rankin, *Feast* (Birlinn Books, £25; *birlinn.co.uk*) is a guide to effortless entertaining for every occasion. This first-foot coal recipe follows an ancient tradition: in Scotland, the first visitor after midnight on Hogmanay should be a tall, dark and handsome stranger who brings a gift of coal for good luck, prosperity and a warm hearth for the year ahead. This recipe provides a delicious edible alternative to the real thing, and will make your Hogmanay celebrations extra special.

MAKES AROUND 10

INGREDIENTS

- *200g caster sugar*
- *5 tbsp golden syrup*
- *2 tsp bicarbonate of soda*
- *200g dark chocolate – at least 70%*

METHOD

Line a deep, square baking tin with greaseproof paper. Warm the sugar and syrup together over a very low heat in a deep pan until the sugar has melted and the mixture reaches 145°C and is a golden brown colour. Remove from the heat and add the bicarb.

The mixture will immediately puff up (this is why we use a deep pan). Beat together vigorously, and while still bubbling, pour into the tin. Leave to set and, once cooled, break into large chunks.

Melt the chocolate in a glass bowl over a barely simmering pan of hot water. Spear each piece of honeycomb with a cocktail stick and dip into the chocolate, completely covering the whole thing.

Leave to set on a sheet of greaseproof paper.

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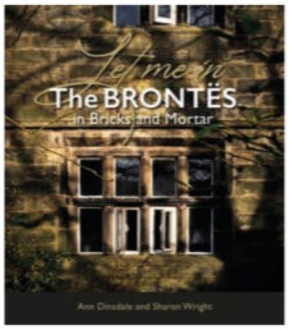
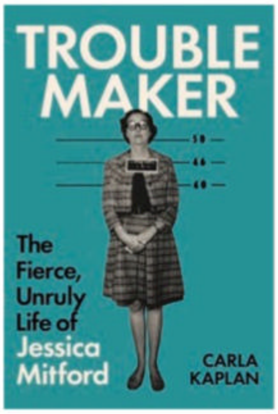


Let me in: The Brontës in Bricks and Mortar by Ann Dinsdale and Sharon Wright (£25, Great Northern Books). An eye-opening odyssey that combines the surprising history of key Brontë houses with their sometimes glorious, sometimes heartbreaking, always fascinating afterlives.

PETER ACKROYD
FORGOTTEN
LONDON

Forgotten London by Peter Ackroyd (£25, Frances Lincoln). No city shaped the modern world quite like London. This richly illustrated book uncovers its hidden stories, from the transformative Victorian era to the Second World War.



Troublemaker by Carla Kaplan (£27.50, Hurst Publishers). This new biography of Jessica 'Decca' Mitford uses 12,000 letters and new interviews to tell the life story of the Mitford sister who rejected privilege and scandal to fight social injustice.

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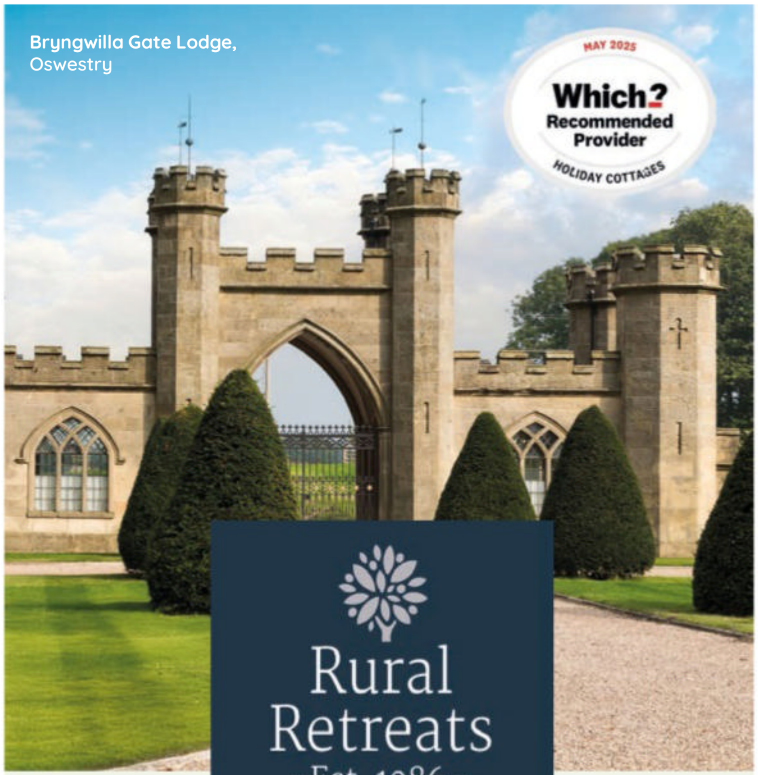

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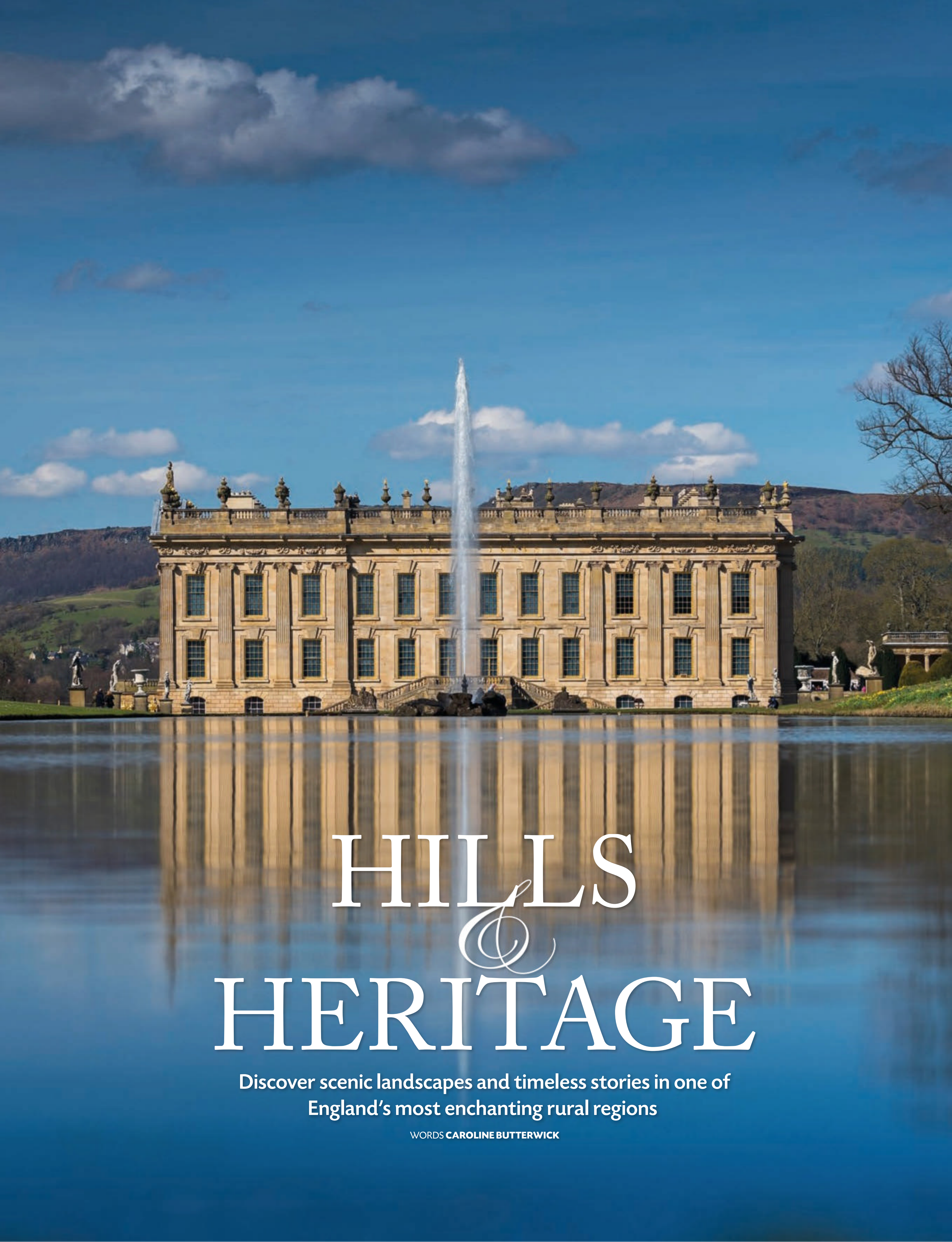
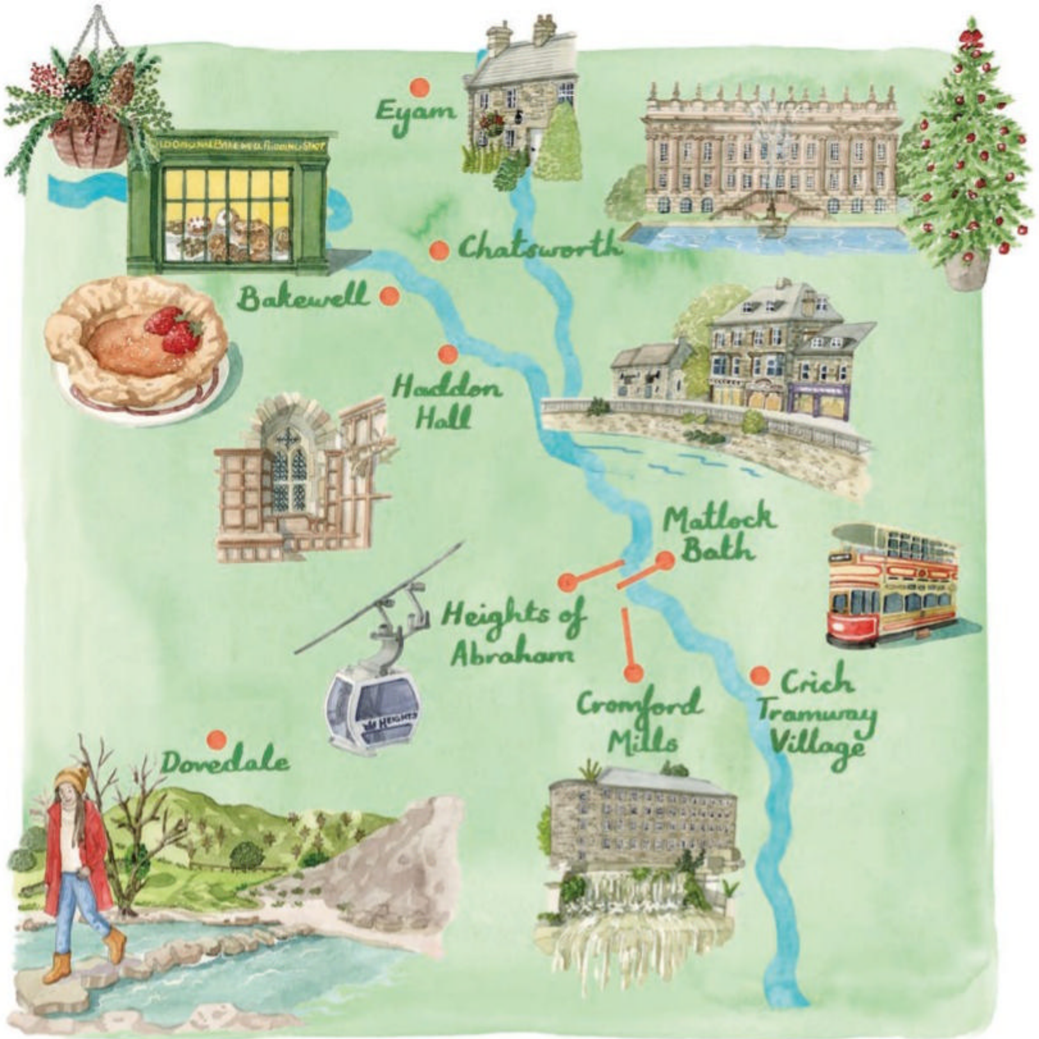


HILLS & HERITAGE

Discover scenic landscapes and timeless stories in one of England's most enchanting rural regions

WORDS **CAROLINE BUTTERWICK**



***Previous pages, from left*: Dovedale, with its stepping stones across the river; Chatsworth House's splendid facade**
***Clockwise from above*: Headstone Viaduct; the Painted Hall at Chatsworth; Bakewell's original pudding shop**

A beguiling region of scenic walks, historic houses and idyllic villages, the Derbyshire Dales span over 300 square miles in the heart of rural England. Part of this picturesque area lies within the Peak District National Park – the oldest in Britain – making it a haven for lovers of history, heritage and the great outdoors.

No visit to the Derbyshire Dales is complete without exploring Chatsworth House, an iconic stately home passed down through 17 generations of the Cavendish family over nearly 500 years. As you approach, the golden stone of the grand facade set against the lush green parkland is breathtaking. Inside, visitors can explore more than 25 opulent rooms, featuring masterpieces from one of Europe's most significant private art collections, as well as Neoclassical sculptures, antique books and fascinating historical artefacts. Outside, 105 acres of landscaped gardens invite gentle exploration, with winding paths, floral displays and striking water features.

> Bakewell is a must-visit for Jane Austen fans; the quaint town is thought to be the inspiration for Lambton in Pride and Prejudice

Film fans may recognise Chatsworth as Pemberley, Mr Darcy's home in the 2005 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* – a fitting role, as Jane Austen herself is believed to have visited. During the festive season, Christmas at Chatsworth transforms the house and gardens with lavish decorations, twinkling lights, beautifully adorned trees and a magical illuminated trail through the grounds.

Just a stone's throw from Chatsworth lies Bakewell, a charming market town famed for its Bakewell pudding, which is said to have been created by accident in the 19th century when a cook misread a recipe. Today, this delicious dessert can be sampled in cafés and bakeries across town, most famously at the Old Original Bakewell Pudding Shop, which has been selling it for 160 years. Strolling through Bakewell's cobbled streets reveals hidden courtyards, independent boutiques and quaint cafés. It's also a must-visit for Jane Austen fans; she is believed to have written parts of *Pride and Prejudice* while staying at the Rutland Arms Hotel, and the picturesque town is thought to be the inspiration for Lambton in the novel.

The peaceful River Wye runs through Bakewell, the perfect spot for a relaxing riverside walk. Don't miss the striking Bakewell Bridge, dating back to the 1300s and one of the oldest in the country. ▶

PHOTOS: © VISIT PEAK DISTRICT & DERBYSHIRE/WWW.SHOOT360.CO.UK/ CHRISTOPHER BARNARD/ALAMY. ILLUSTRATION: © LAURA HALLETT

THE OLD ORIGINAL BAKEWELL PUDDING SHOP
THE ORIGINAL SHOP WITH THE ORIGINAL PUDDING
THE ORIGINAL BAKEWELL PUDDING SHOP
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ENGLAND'S HALL OF FAME

Clockwise from right: A plague cottage in Eyam; Haddon Hall; cable cars ride above the Derwent Valley to the Heights of Abraham

PLAGUE COTTAGE

See our website **discoverbritain.com** for more on the Peak District

Over 900 years old, Haddon Hall is one of the only houses in England to have been owned by the same family for its entire existence

Bakewell is also the starting point for the Monsal Trail, an accessible 8.5-mile, traffic-free route ideal for walking and cycling. Following the old Manchester to London Midland Railway line, the trail winds through limestone valleys and dramatic countryside. A highlight is the Headstone Viaduct, best viewed from Monsal Head, offering panoramic views of the surrounding landscape.

A short drive from Monsal Head brings you to the remarkable village of Eyam, known as the 'Plague Village'. In 1665, when the plague arrived from London in a parcel of cloth, the villagers made the extraordinary decision to quarantine themselves to prevent the disease from spreading to surrounding areas. This act of self-sacrifice is remembered through sites such as the boundary stone, the plague cottages and Eyam Church, which houses fascinating displays about the village's story. The Eyam Museum provides

PHOTOS: © GARY WALLIS/VISIT PEAK DISTRICT & DERBYSHIRE/IAN DAGNALL/ALAMY

further insight into daily life during the outbreak and the bravery of those who chose to stay. Today, Eyam is a peaceful, scenic place to explore, with tearooms, craft shops and walking trails galore. Visit in late August to see locals decorating wells and springs with pictures made using flower petals and other natural materials, a tradition that dates back centuries.

South of Bakewell, Haddon Hall stands as one of the country's best-preserved medieval manors. With over 900 years of history, it is one of the only houses in England to have been owned by the same family for its entire existence, and offers an authentic glimpse into the past.

Haddon makes an imposing sight, its towering grey walls silhouetted against the surrounding landscape. The hall is the private residence of Lord and Lady Edward Manners, but plenty of rooms are open to visitors at selected times throughout the year. Explore the hall's ancient kitchens, wander rooms adorned with centuries-old tapestries, and climb stone stairs worn smooth by generations of footsteps. The beautifully maintained terraced gardens, bursting with blooms, command stunning views of the Derbyshire countryside.

Nearby Matlock Bath is another appealing Dales town. Nicknamed 'Little Switzerland' by Lord Byron, it has attracted visitors since the 17th century with its steep, tree-clad hillsides and scenic charm. Despite being landlocked, it's often affectionately referred to as Derbyshire's seaside town, thanks to its riverside fish and chip shops and amusement arcades.

A must-visit is the Heights of Abraham, starting with a cable car ride from Matlock Bath over the Derwent Valley. At the summit, visitors can explore a 60-acre historic hilltop park that opened in 1787 as a pleasure garden for Georgian visitors. Discover the site's connections to the Industrial Revolution, take a guided tour through ancient caverns, and follow a heritage ▶

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THE PLANNER

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Regular trains run from London St Pancras International to Derby in less than 2 hours. From here, there are local train services to places like Matlock Bath. The area is well served with bus routes, including The Peak Sightseer in the summer months, run by Stagecoach. *trainline.com; stagecoachbus.com*

WHERE TO STAY

The Beeley Inn on the Chatsworth Estate is an ideal base for exploring the area. There are rooms above the inn, as well as several in a hamlet of cottages nearby. The rooms are comfortable and bright, with some featuring roll top baths and views across the village. *chatsworthescapes.co.uk/beeleyinn*

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The Cavendish Hotel on the Chatsworth Estate is the place to go for a traditional English afternoon tea, with delicate finger sandwiches, crumbly buttermilk scones accompanied by local clotted cream and homemade jam, and freshly baked cakes. The Hassop Station Cafe is a popular pit stop for hungry walkers on the Monsal Trail, with everything from hearty sandwiches and jacket potatoes to burgers and salads. Bikes can be hired here too. The charming 18th-century Beeley Inn, a former coaching inn, is a popular spot for both locals and visitors to enjoy a traditional pub meal. *cavendishhotelbaslow.co.uk; hassopstation.co.uk; chatsworthescapes.co.uk/beeleyinn*

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Yorkshire Relish
The sauce of good taste
180

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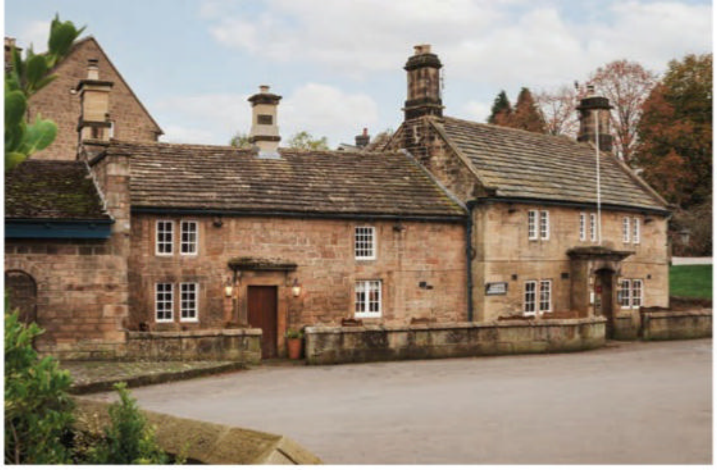
From top: **Cromford Mills; Crich Tramway Village**

trail with stunning views at every turn. In the winter season, The Lights of Abraham event bathes the attraction in a warm festive glow.

Nearby lies Cromford Mills, built in 1771 by Sir Richard Arkwright. Guided tours reveal its history as the world's first successful water-powered cotton spinning mill, playing a pivotal role in the Industrial Revolution. Cromford village also boasts the beloved Scarthin Books, an independent shop spread across four creaky, book-filled floors – a paradise for readers.

A short drive away, the village of Crich is home to the Crich Tramway Village. This open-air museum features vintage trams trundling through the countryside, a charming village, and attractions including a traditional pub and sweet shop: a visit here is a nostalgic trip back in time.

Don't leave the Dales without seeing Dovedale, a dramatic limestone ravine carved by the River Dove. Popular with walkers, the area offers gentle riverside strolls and more challenging hill walks. The stepping stones across the river, where you can tread carefully across the water, are famous locally. On sunny days, it makes an ideal spot for a scenic picnic – especially with a slice of Bakewell pudding in hand.



WIN

A LUXURY STAY ON THE CHATSWORTH ESTATE

The Beeley Inn is an idyllic 5AA* coaching inn, ideally situated in a cosy corner of the Chatsworth Estate and in the Peak District National Park, with 35,000 acres of glorious countryside on its doorstep. Enter our new competition to win a luxury break for two people at this beautiful rural retreat.

The historic 18th-century Beeley Inn was where coaches carrying visitors from London and the Peak District stopped to rest their horses. Illustrious visitors included Charles Dickens, and it is rumoured that King Edward VII often met his mistress Alice Keppel there.

Each of the inn's en-suite bedrooms is individually designed and equipped with little extras for a memorable stay, with luxuriously comfortable beds, fluffy towels and bathrobes. Our lucky winner and their guest will enjoy a two-night stay in one of the inn's Spacious rooms in a cottage near the inn, beautifully decorated in soothing neutrals.

The delicious food at the Beeley Inn has earned it a Michelin Guide mention. As well as a full English breakfast each morning, our winners will be treated to dinner in the restaurant each evening, choosing from a menu of classics from beef and ale pie to Sunday roast. Guests can choose to dine in the inn's stone-walled, wood-beamed interior or in the bright and spacious Brasserie, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering inspiring views over the stream into Beeley village.

The Beeley Inn is part of the Chatsworth Estate, and a trip to the legendary stately home is a must during your stay. Chatsworth House contains works of art that span more than 2,000 years, while its 105 acres of gardens contain historic and modern waterworks, sculptures, a Victorian rock garden, a maze and more.

Our winners will receive tickets to Chatsworth House and Garden, and can revisit as many times as they choose during their stay in this beautiful corner of Derbyshire.

beeleyinn.co.uk; chatsworth.org

READER OFFER

All readers can save 10% off a relaxing stay at the Beeley Inn, paying from £163.00** per couple per night for comfortable accommodation and full English breakfast. Visit www.beeleyinn.co.uk and use promo code BRITAIN_10

**Offer based on two sharing a double/twin room, valid until 31 March 2026, excluding 8 November to 14 December 2025 and 24 December 2025 to 2 January 2026, and subject to availability.

HOW TO ENTER

For your chance to win this fantastic prize, enter online at **www.discoverbritain.com/competitions/inn**

TERMS AND CONDITIONS Closing date for entries is 23.59 GMT on 9 March 2026, and the prize must be taken by 8 March 2027. The prize is based on two people sharing a Spacious double/twin room, and includes breakfast on each morning and dinner on each evening, with a dinner allocation of £37 per person. The prize also includes Chatsworth House and Garden tickets, subject to opening times; see website. Booking is subject to availability, and excludes 24 December 2026 to 2 January 2027. The prize is not transferable, and does not include travel, personal expenditure and incidental costs. Competition open to entrants in the UK and US only.

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So the shortest day came, and the year died
And everywhere down the centuries of the
snow-white world
Came people singing, dancing,
To drive the dark away.
Susan Cooper, 'The Shortest Day'

They came in darkness, a motley crowd some 4,500 strong, to windswept Salisbury Plain – young and old, punk, pagan, pilgrim, Druid, New Ager, eco-warrior, wiccan, shaman, sightseer… Some wore bobble hats, some antlers or mistletoe crowns. In a mood of anticipation, they waited as the sky turned from ink to powder blue to grey, and out of the shadows loomed the enigmatic stone colossi that exert such a pull on the imagination.

So, at 8.04am at Stonehenge, began 21 December 2024, the shortest day, the winter solstice, the pagans' Yule. Drummers drummed, a hobby horse pranced, Morris men capered, yogis performed sun salutations… King Arthur Uther Pendragon, bearded and in full Druid regalia, conferred a knighthood on a young man. A harmony choir, a vision in scarlet, sang to honour the earth.

For pagans in particular, the winter solstice is more important than the summer solstice, since it is on this day that the sun is 'reborn' for the coming year – and no site holds so potent a spiritual power than Stonehenge, described by UNESCO as "the most architecturally sophisticated prehistoric stone circle in the world".

As a curator for English Heritage, Dr Jennifer Wexler has responsibility for some 60 prehistoric sites. A specialist in archeological landscapes, she holds a Masters and PhD degree from University College London. Yet, for all the scientific rigour she brings to her work, she is as susceptible as anyone to the enchantment of such ancient rites. "I've been to three summer and two winter

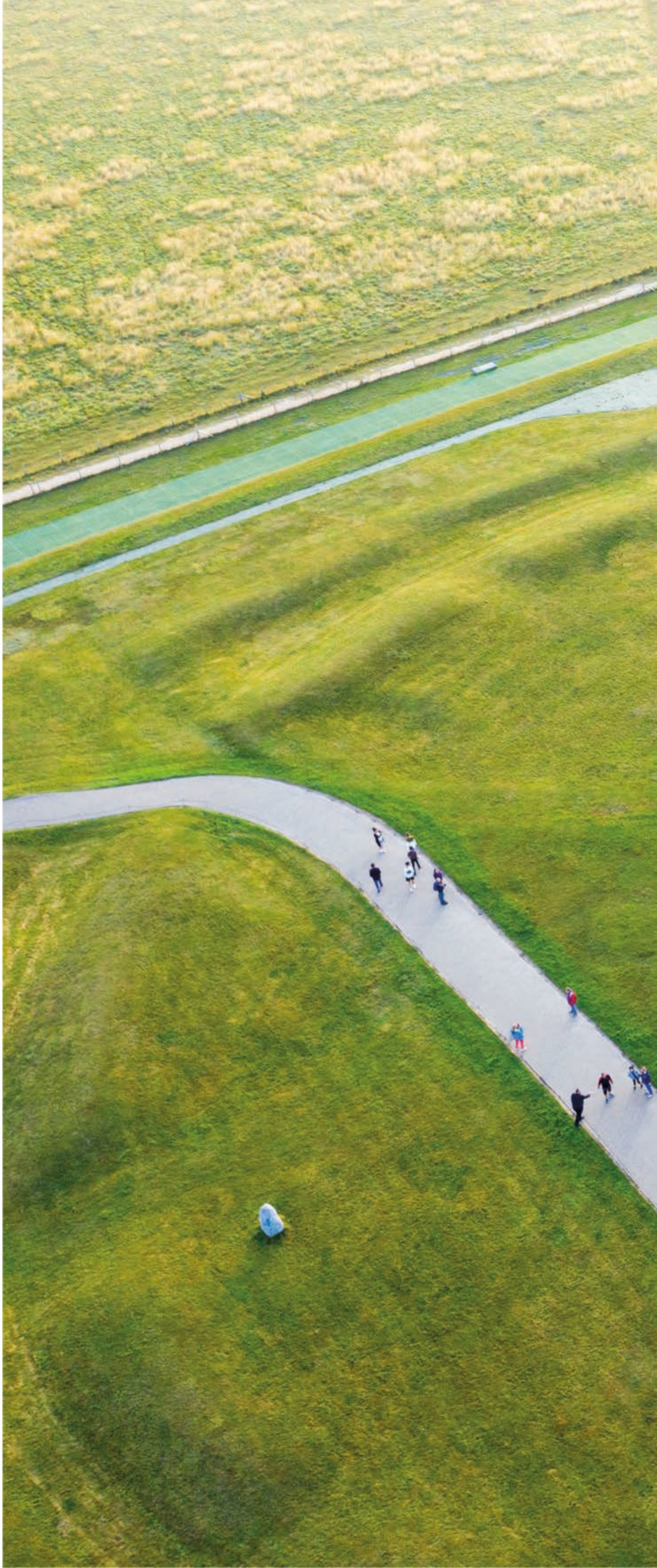


PHOTO: © GAVIN HELLIER/AWL IMAGES

Lord *of the* RINGS

Every December for the winter solstice, crowds gravitate to the ancient stones at Stonehenge, whose mystery has confounded and enchanted for centuries

WORDS **ROSE SHEPHERD**

Clockwise from above: **Winter solstice sunrise; the stone circle today; Stonehenge in around 1860, before restoration**

solstices," she says. This winter will be her third. "In some ways the winter solstice is even more special. Being out there in the early morning, at that dark, cold time of year, with people converging, all watching for the return of the light, can feel quite magical and mystical."

Our fascination with Stonehenge goes back centuries, as scholars have tried to fathom its meaning, its purpose and how it was created. In 1130 AD, in his *History of the English*, Henry of Huntingdon wrote of "Stanenges" where "stones of remarkable size are raised up like gates, in such a way that gates seem to be placed on top of gates. And no one can work out how the stones were so skilfully lifted up to such a height or why they were erected there." Indeed.

Around six years later, in his *History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey of Monmouth had the answers. A ring of stones known as 'The Giant's Dance' had been brought by titans from Africa to Ireland, and thence transported to England by the wizard Merlin, as a monument to Britons slain by the treacherous Saxon Hengist.

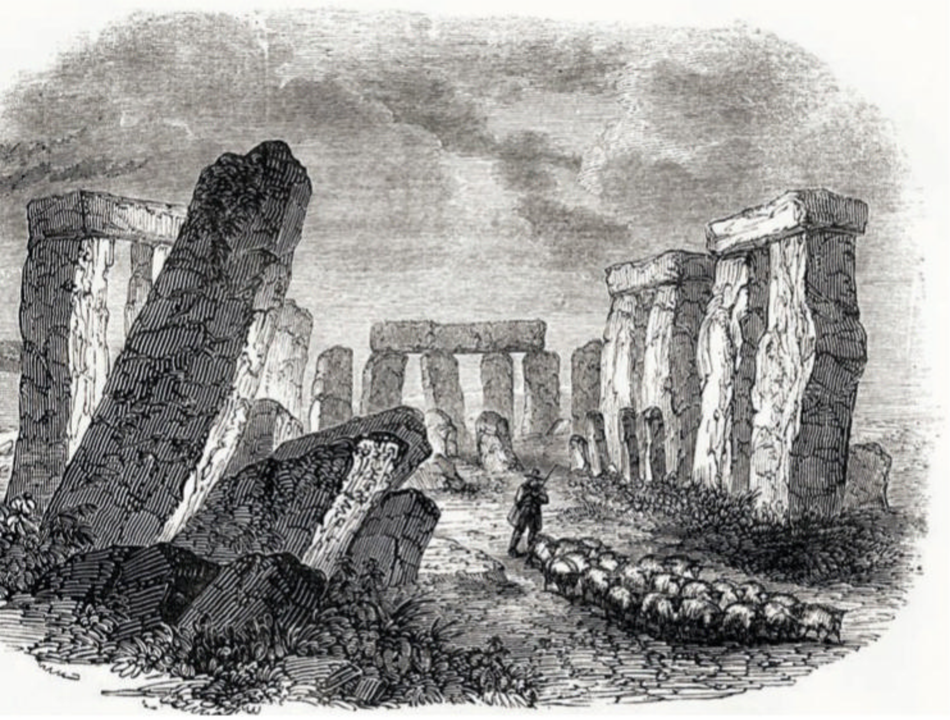
Geoffrey's pseudo-history gained acceptance, but by the Elizabethan age, scepticism had crept in. Renaissance thinkers were not in thrall to such medievalism, though alternative theories eluded them.

In 1620, James I ordered the architect Inigo Jones to investigate the stones. Noting their "rarity of invention" and "beautiful proportions, as elegant in Order, and as stately in Aspect, as any", Jones was convinced that they were the work of the Romans.

In 1663, Walter Charleton, physician to Charles II, begged to differ. In his *Chorea gigantum: or The most famous antiquity of Great Britain, vulgarly called Stone-heng*, he attributed the monument to the Vikings.

It was antiquarian John Aubrey who, in 1666, produced the first accurate plan of Stonehenge and came up with the enduring notion that such stone circles were Druid temples. However, while Stonehenge is a deeply sacred site for Druids, their ancestors can have had no hand in it, since Druids don't enter the annals until the 4th century BC.

So, if these ancient priestly Celts were not responsible, who was? Competing claims are made for the Greeks, Egyptians, Phoenicians… In *Chariots of the Gods?*, in 1968, Erich von Däniken threw aliens into the mix,



arguing that the structures of Stonehenge were too sophisticated to have been built by the civilisation of the Neolithic age to whom they are attributed: migrants from the Continent, originating from Anatolia, who introduced farming to Europe.

"I think there will always be questions," says Dr Wexler, clearly sceptical of such fantastical conjecture. "We don't have a written record so the archeology, just by its nature, is always partial, but with Stonehenge we actually know a huge amount, compared to a lot of our archeological sites."

According to English Heritage, the earliest construction was a simple 'henge', a circular ditch with an inner and outer bank. Inside were 56 pits named the 'Aubrey Holes' after John Aubrey. They are thought to have held timber posts, but some may have held stones, possibly some of the three-tonne 'bluestone' boulders from the Preseli hills in Wales. The discovery of cremated remains hints at a burial ground.

In the next phase a circle of the Welsh bluestones was raised. And in around 2500 BC massive sarsen stones were brought from an area 15 miles to the north. Weighing ▶

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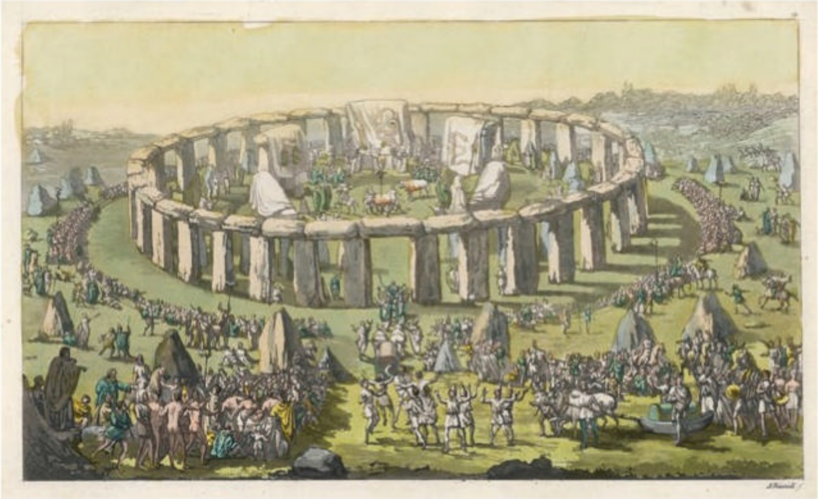
The more Stonehenge surrenders its secrets, the more the enigma deepens



between 20 and 35 tonnes and standing up to 23 feet high, they form the central horseshoe and the uprights and lintels of the outer circle – the trios or 'trilithons', resembling doorways – while the smaller bluestones formed an inner oval and arch that shifted over time. Outlying sarsens include the 36-tonne Heel Stone.

The stones serve as a kind of solar calendar, aligned towards the sunrise at the summer solstice and the sunset at the winter solstice. "What's really interesting," says Dr Wexler, "is that it's not just Stonehenge that had this kind of alignment, but a number of monuments from the Neolithic age. It was the time of the first farmers, of a changing relationship to the land."

Currently, researchers are investigating whether Stonehenge also aligns with the moon. As Dr Wexler says, the wide-open space of Salisbury Plain would have been ideal for night-sky observation.

Thanks to modern techniques such as DNA analysis, x-ray fluorescence testing and radiocarbon dating, new discoveries are made all the time. Just last year, analysis of the chemical make-up of the six-tonne Altar Stone revealed that it came not from Wales but from the north of Scotland, 430 miles distant. To the theories of Stonehenge as a calendar, observatory, cemetery, place of healing, can now be added the proposition that it was a work of collaboration designed to forge an alliance between communities from far-flung regions.

And yet the more Stonehenge surrenders its secrets, the more the enigma deepens. It is almost easier to believe that giants, or wizards, or green men from Mars were its creators than that our ancestors had the wherewithal and ingenuity to transport and erect stone of such weight and mass. "It is," as Dr Wexler says, "an incredibly sophisticated monument, built by people with a deep understanding of their world."

In a way, it would be good to think that we shall never 'crack the code' – and that this magical place will forever guard its mystery.

***Above:* An illustration by Charles Hamilton Smith (1821) of a pre-Roman Druidic festival at Stonehenge**
***Right:* The stones at sunset**

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FESTIVE FARE

After more than a century of trading, London's iconic department stores are still top of the list for Christmas shopping

WORDS **FELICITY DAY**

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HARRODS
Harrods
Harrods

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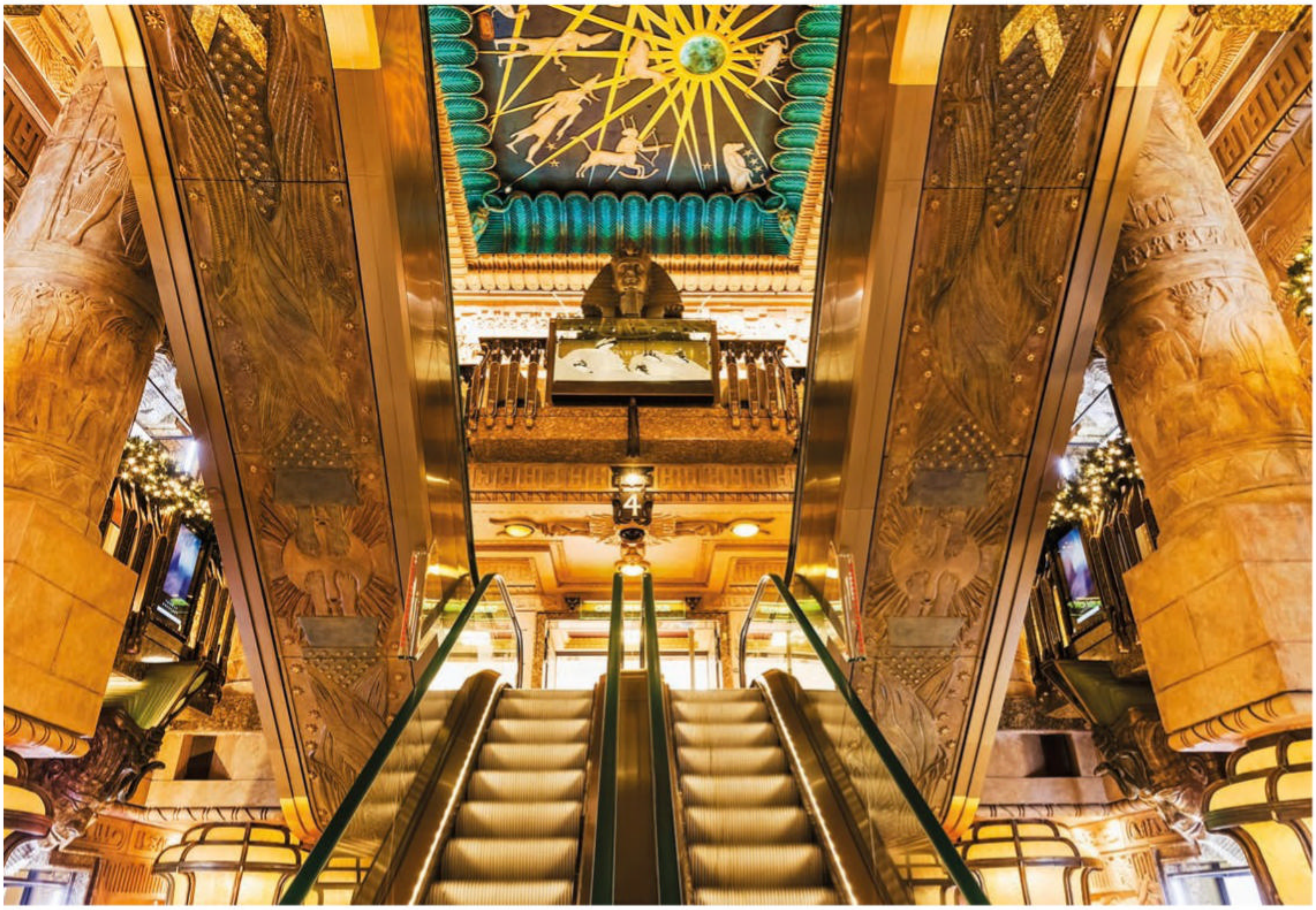
FORTNUM & MASON



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Christmas is a time rich in tradition; from decorating trees to stirring up a plum pudding and singing carols, we take comfort from following in the footsteps of the generations that came before us. So what more fitting place to go Christmas shopping than in one of the iconic London stores that have been supplying enticing festive fare for a couple of centuries or more?

Fortnum & Mason on Piccadilly has seen an astonishing 317 Christmases come and go since it was founded in 1707, when entrepreneurial ex-footman to Queen Anne, William Fortnum, brought the aristocratic connections he had gleaned at the palace into business with grocer Hugh Mason. Famous ever since for its luxurious foodstuffs, the store is best known for its sumptuously filled, monogrammed wicker hampers, synonymous with seasonal gifting since the 1920s, but first sold in the 1730s. Then, the hampers were snapped up by wealthy Georgians travelling to spa resorts and country seats; instead of eating the mediocre dinners dished up in coaching inns en route, they could tuck into game pies or a scotch egg – a Fortnum's invention. Not only high society's picnic item of choice in the centuries since then, scotch eggs were gifted to Suffragettes to build up their strength after spells in Holloway prison; delivered to Winston Churchill on the Western Front; and carried to Egypt with the archaeologist Howard Carter.

Saunter in through the shop's duck-egg-blue doors at this time of year and there's a chance you'll stumble upon a royal – Fortnum's food has famously graced palace tables across multiple reigns, and it's been a favoured spot for their Christmas shopping, too. Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother insisted on helping staff to wrap her presents, heedless of astonished stares.

Right next door to Fortnum's is Hatchards, a beautiful bay-fronted bookshop that was also born in the 18th century. Founded in 1797 by John Hatchard – an abolitionist dubbed 'The Godly Bookseller' – and trading on its current site since 1801, it counted among its first customers the similarly pious Queen Charlotte, who purchased a hefty history of France. Literary royalty from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf followed her lead, and with five floors of groaning shelves and satisfyingly creaky floorboards, it remains a haven for writers and readers alike.

From the oldest bookshop in London, it's just a hop, skip and a jump to the oldest toy shop in the world. Hamleys – which has helped generation upon ▶

Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother insisted on helping Fortnum's staff to wrap her presents, heedless of astonished stares

Previous page, from top: Harrods' spectacular facade after dark; festive window display at Liberty
Opposite page, clockwise from top: Christmas shopping at Fortnum & Mason; one of the store's tempting food displays; Fortnum's is known for its artistic Christmas window decorations
Above: The Egyptian Escalator, Harrods

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Harrods had London's very first escalator. Ruffled customers were offered a choice of smelling salts or cognac on reaching the top

generation of children to write a comprehensive list for Father Christmas – began life as 'Noah's Ark' in 1760, the brainchild of Cornishman William Hamley. Originally based in Holborn, its colourful seven-storey Regent Street store was first opened in 1881. Since then, its toy story has not been without its challenges – financial woes caused the business to close briefly in 1931, and the shop was bombed five times during the Second World War, when staff donned tin hats to supply customers at the door – but at Christmas time, bursting with toys for children to touch and try, and filled with energetic elves, it remains the 'joy emporium' it was in the Victorian age.

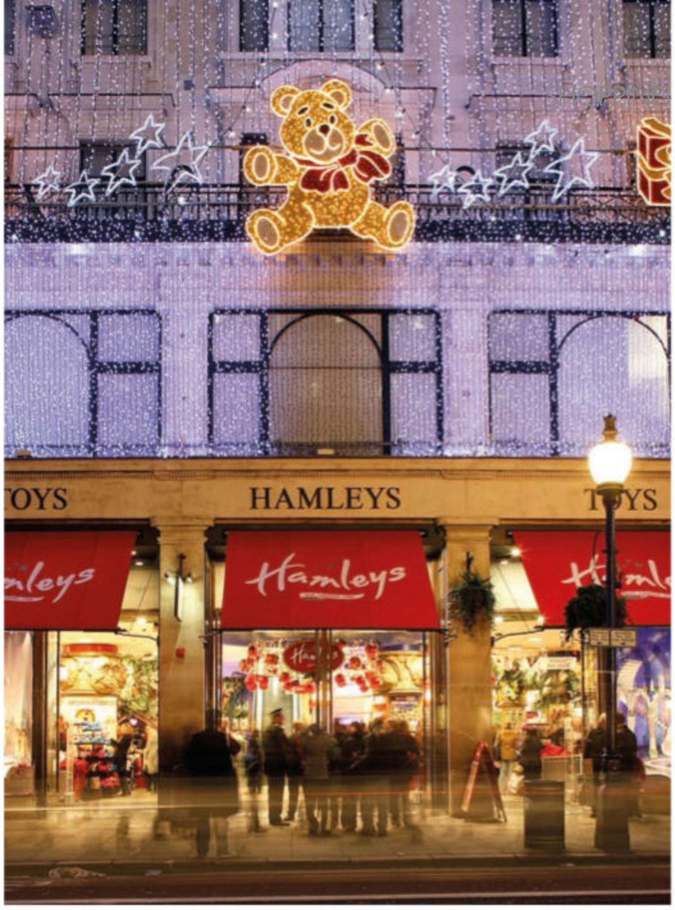
The doyenne of London department stores, Harrods, has had its difficulties too. The stately Knightsbridge store – which traces its origins back to 1849, when draper-turned-grocer Charles Henry Harrod took over a small shop on the site – was almost wiped off the map in December 1883, after a huge fire all but destroyed its building. But the retailer rose from the ashes to become the decadent luxury store of worldwide renown, patronised by everyone from movie stars to international royalty.

The Harrods family sold up in 1889, but their name stayed above the door as the store transformed into a vast temple to shopping – then and now renowned for high-end fashion, but home to hundreds of different departments (at last count, over 330, spread over a million square feet). Harrods had London's very first escalator – ruffled customers were offered a choice of smelling salts or cognac on reaching the top! – and an infamous pet store, where, from 1917 until the 1970s, the rich and famous could purchase the most exotic of animals. Noel Coward was gifted a Harrods alligator for Christmas in 1951, while Ronald Reagan once rang the store to order a baby elephant for a Republican rally, or so the story goes. A furry friend of a different kind – the teddy bear that went on to inspire the story of Winnie-the-Pooh – was brought home from Harrods, too. If not for its eclectic history, it's worth beating a path to Brompton Road in December just for the Christmas shop, with its gifts and baubles galore.

Its most serious rival in the capital's Christmas shopping stakes is Liberty, just turned 150 years old. Its mock-Tudor store, a stone's throw from Oxford Circus, might be less than a tenth of the size of the colossal Harrods, but what it lacks in square footage it more than makes up for in style: constructed from the great oak timbers of two decommissioned 'triple decker' navy ships in the 1920s, Liberty's interiors have a historic manor house feel, with wood-panelled rooms, lead casement windows and a great, galleried atrium.

Founded by Arthur Lasenby Liberty, the store grew quickly from a small space in Regent Street selling ▶

From top: **Hamleys, the Christmas-time 'joy emporium'; a festive tree suspended from the ceiling at Liberty; Selfridges, glowing at dusk**



PHOTOS: © HEMIS/NATHANIEL NOIR/ALAMY/ANDREW MEREDITH

> Harry Selfridge wanted his customers to spend time 'just looking' – revolutionary in Edwardian England

imported fabrics to an emporium laden with furniture, carpets, antiques and curios from all corners of the earth – the "chosen resort of the artistic shopper" of the Victorian era (in the words of customer Oscar Wilde) and renowned for collaborations with designers like William Morris, who created some of the firm's iconic, and still highly coveted, fabric prints.

At the other end of Oxford Street lies the disruptor among London's long-established department stores. Opened in 1909, Selfridges – the brainchild of US-born and -bred Harry Gordon Selfridge – set out to turn shopping into "a pleasure, a pastime, [and] a recreation" for Britons, who have been flooding through its doors in search of the new and exciting ever since (including the world's first TV sets). Selfridge wanted his customers to spend time 'just looking' – revolutionary in Edwardian England, just like the showmanship he brought to his store. From a rifle range (for bored husbands) and roof-garden restaurant (still thriving today) to fashion shows and live music, Selfridges had it all – even an in-store 'supermodel' named Gloria. And at a time when its competitors were bastions of the middle class, it proudly declared that everyone was welcome; browsing ladies of leisure mingled with hard-working women making for the bargain basement.

A man who changed the face of retail in so many ways, Harry Gordon Selfridge also gave us the phrase 'only X shopping days until Christmas' – a more questionable gift, you might say, not least because the true spirit of Christmas can't be shopped for in a store.

But if it could? We would surely find it in one of London's *grandes dames* of retail.

Below: The glorious food hall at Harrods

Love shopping? See our website **discoverbritain.com** for more on London's iconic stores

FRESH FISH
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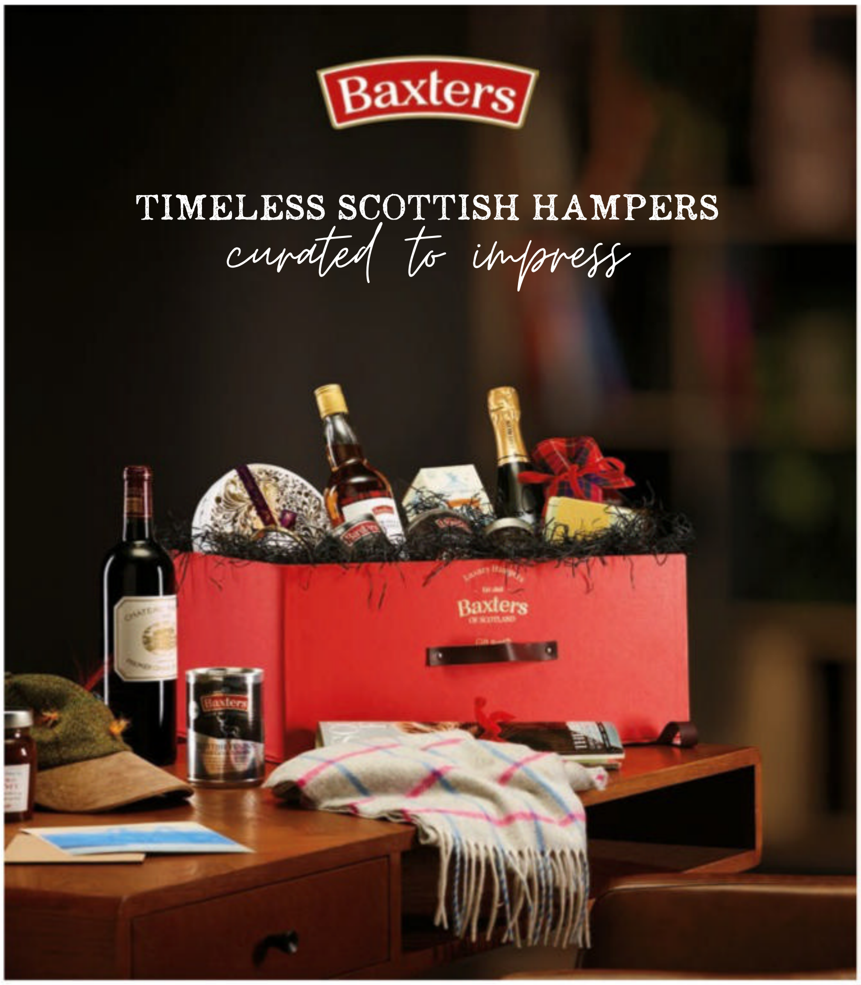

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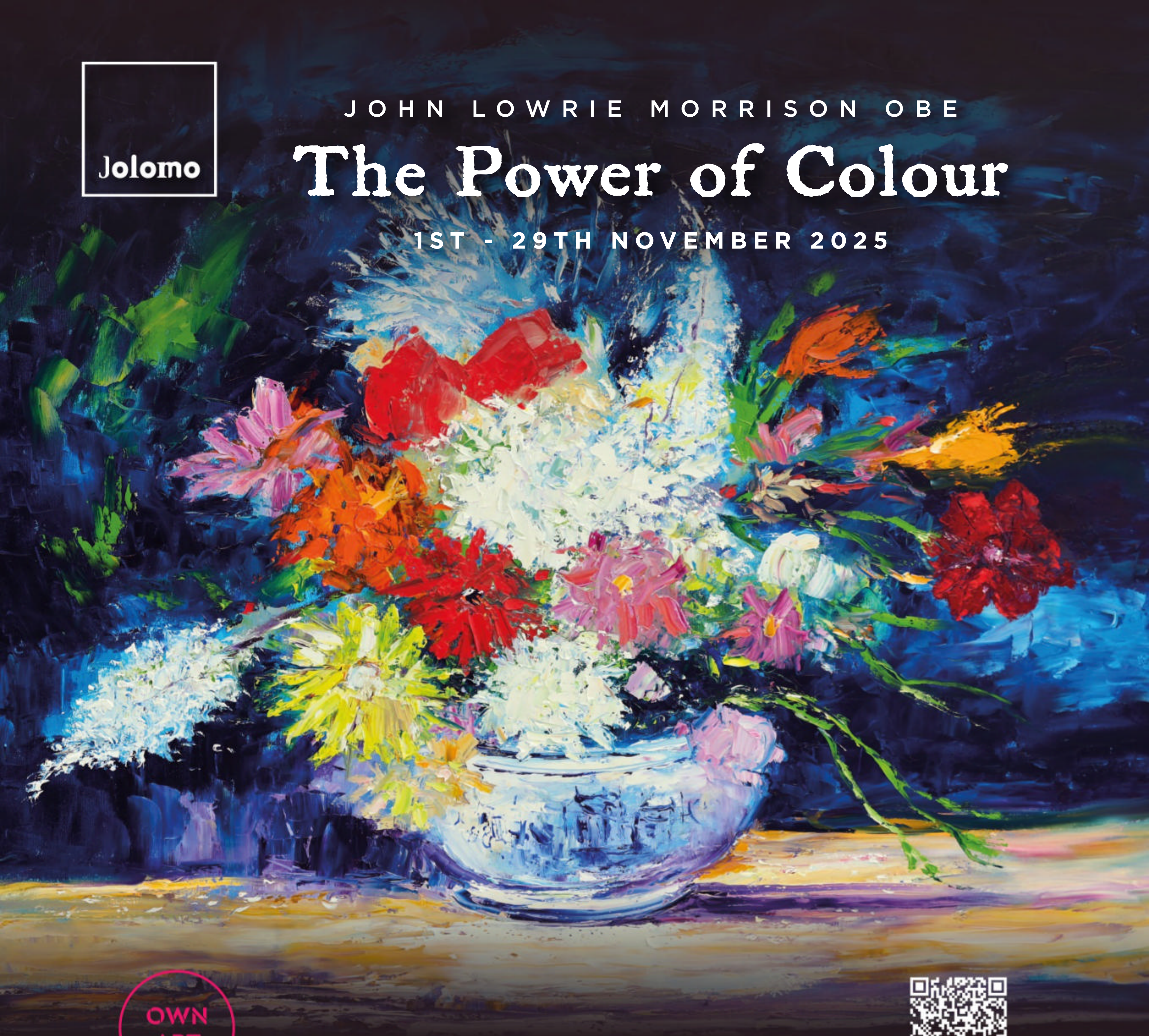

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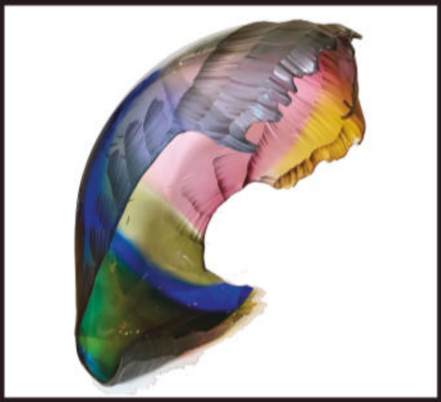

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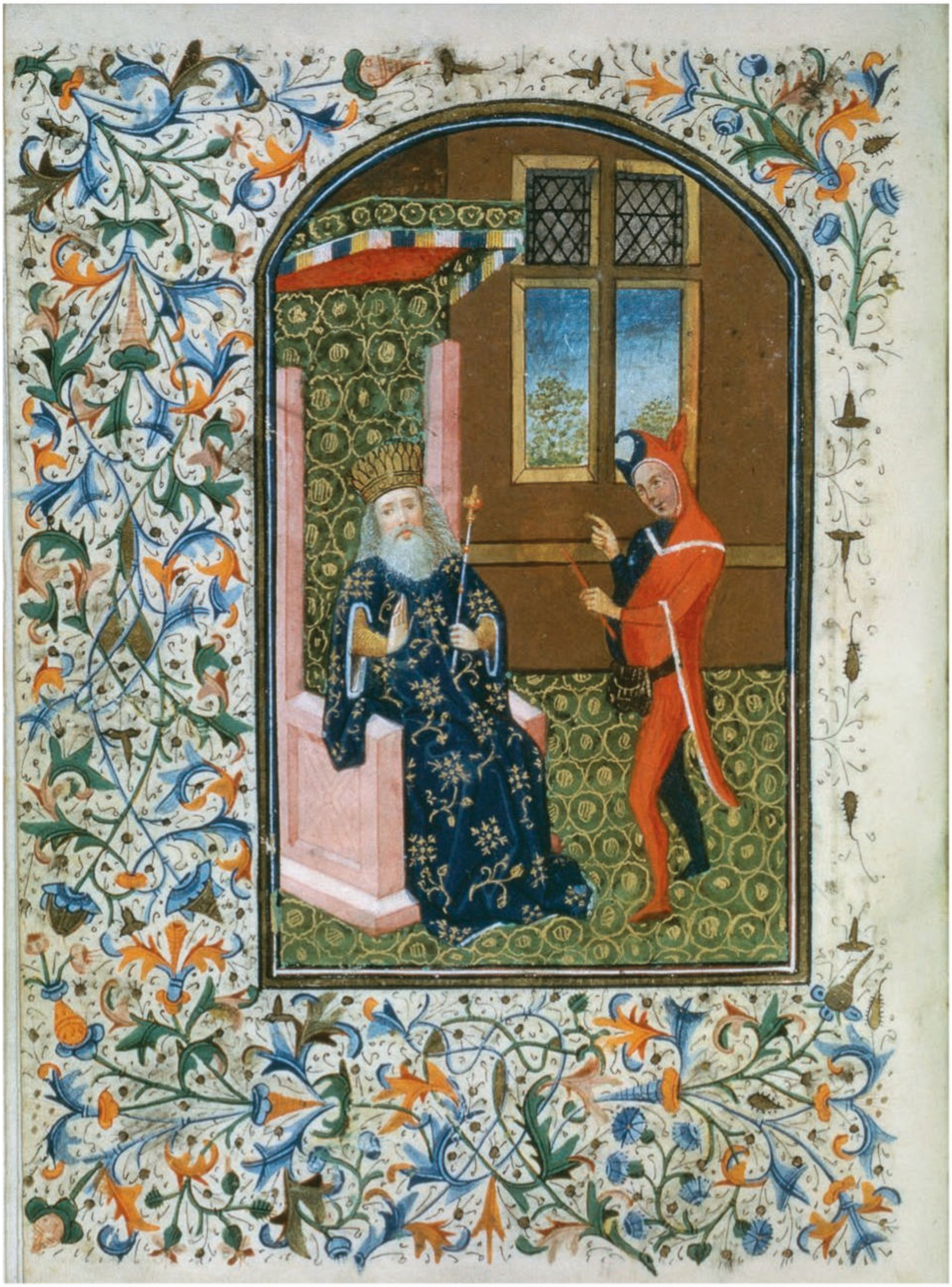


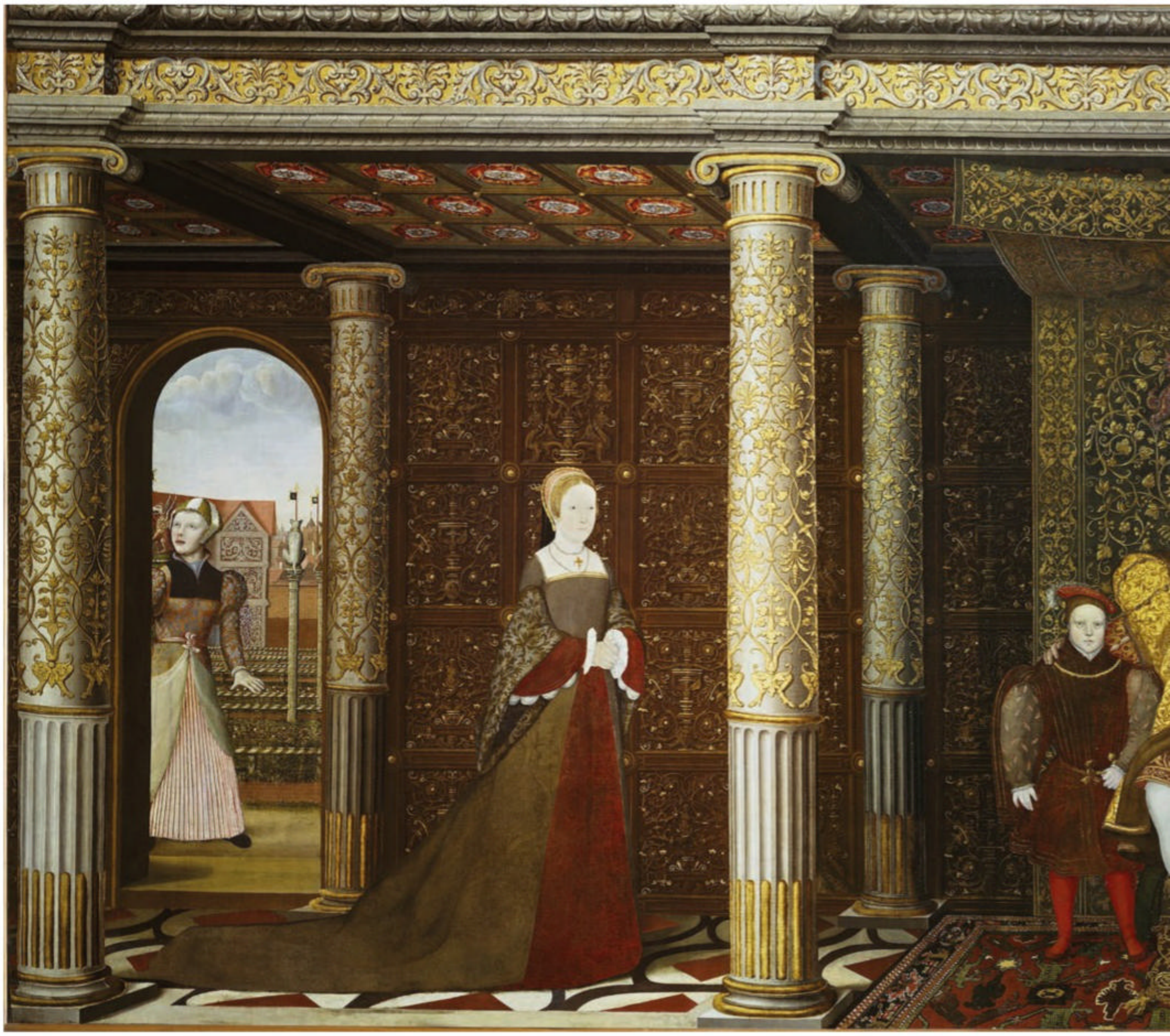
PHOTO: © BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Fooling around

Playing the fool was once a sought-after job. From court pranksters to morale-boosters on the battlefield, we look back at the jolly history of jesters

WORDS **NEIL JONES**

Previous page: King and Jester (vellum; c 1460) by the French School
Clockwise from right: The Family of Henry VIII (c 1545) featuring Will Somer and 'Jane the Fole'; English court jesters in the 14th century



Among records of the reign of Henry II (1154–89), it is noted that the King made a grant of 30 acres of land at Hemingstone in Suffolk to a certain Roland le Pettour, possibly on the latter's retirement. Royal generosity came with an unusual condition, however: that le Pettour return to court every Christmas Day to perform (as his name suggests) "saltum, siffletum et pettum" – a leap, a whistle and a fart. This particular party piece was clearly considered a mirth-inducing blast.

A flatulist might not make top festive billing today, but playing the fool for royalty and the nobility has a long history, and for those who split a monarch's sides with laughter the rewards could be considerable. The Domesday Book mentions Berdic, 'joculator regis' (a king's joker or fool), holding property in the marches of Wales, while a 'joculatrix', Adelina, held land in Hampshire given to her by William the Conqueror's cousin. Tom le Fol (Tom the Fool), who performed at the marriage celebrations for Edward I's daughter Elizabeth in 1297, was paid 50 shillings: an immense sum compared with the two pennies a day for which a labourer would toil.

Individuals identified as 'follus' or fool cropped up in England in documents from the 12th century, although exact details of how they raised guffaws (Roland le Pettour excepted) are sparse, as entertainers of all sorts – musicians, tumblers, singers, jesters and fools – appeared in medieval account books for feasts under the simple, general heading of 'minstrels', meaning 'little servants'. References to payments made to 13th-century fools associated with Edward II range from a trick played in the water (likely a wintertime ducking) to the purchase of a shield, probably for a mock combat of a type popular at the time.

While fools and jesters came into their own at Christmas and on special occasions, they also had more mundane duties to perform at other times of the year, whether as keeper of the hounds, huntsmen, or messengers. Jesters could also play important roles on the battlefield, boosting morale and making troops laugh with their bawdy songs, or taunting the opposing army – as the legendary Norman figure Taillefer is said to have done, provocatively juggling his sword and lance in front of the English at the Battle of Hastings.

Medieval and Tudor fools broadly fell into two categories: natural or innocent fools, who were individuals with a learning disability; and artificial fools who, astute and educated, put on an act for

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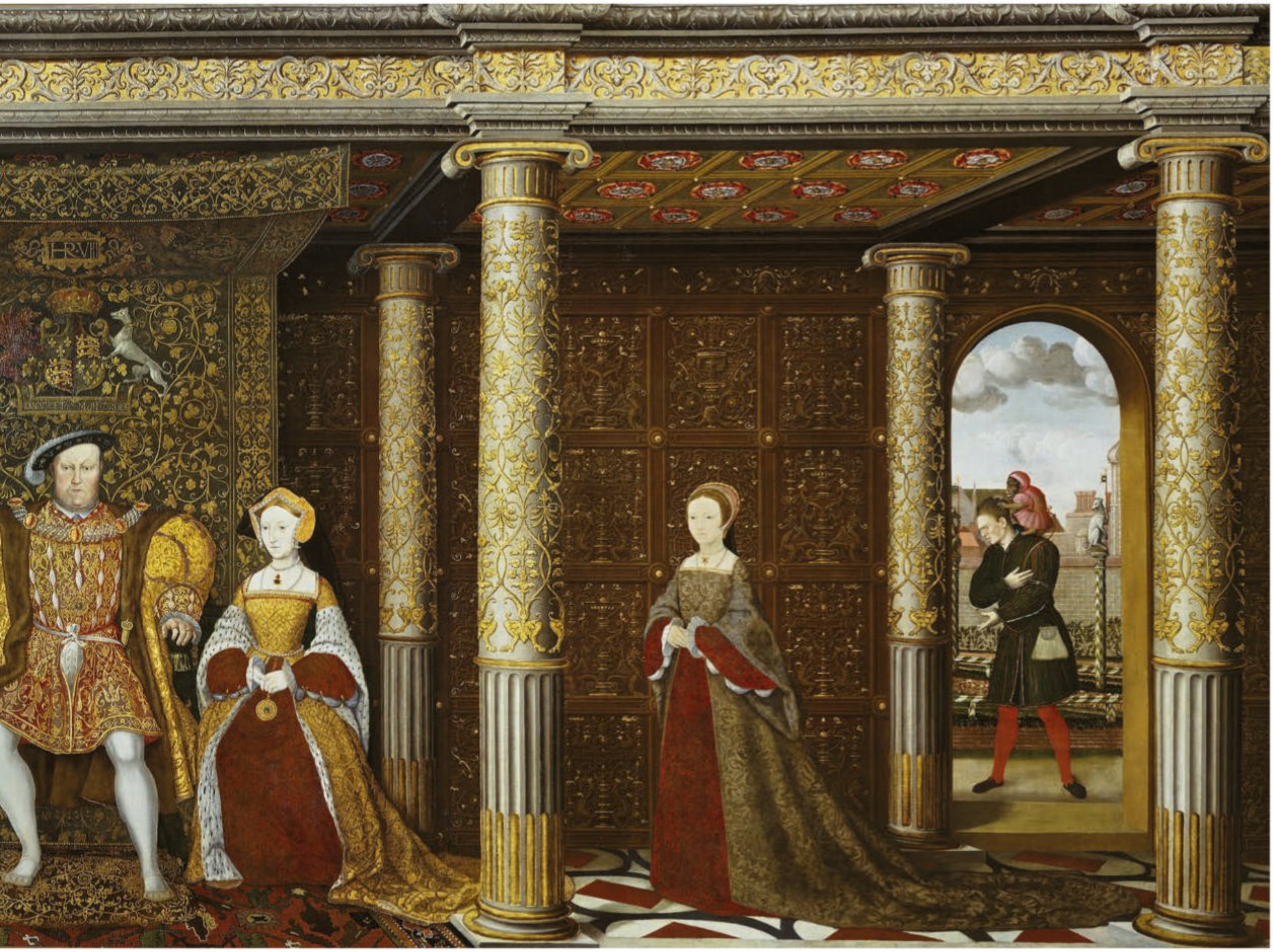
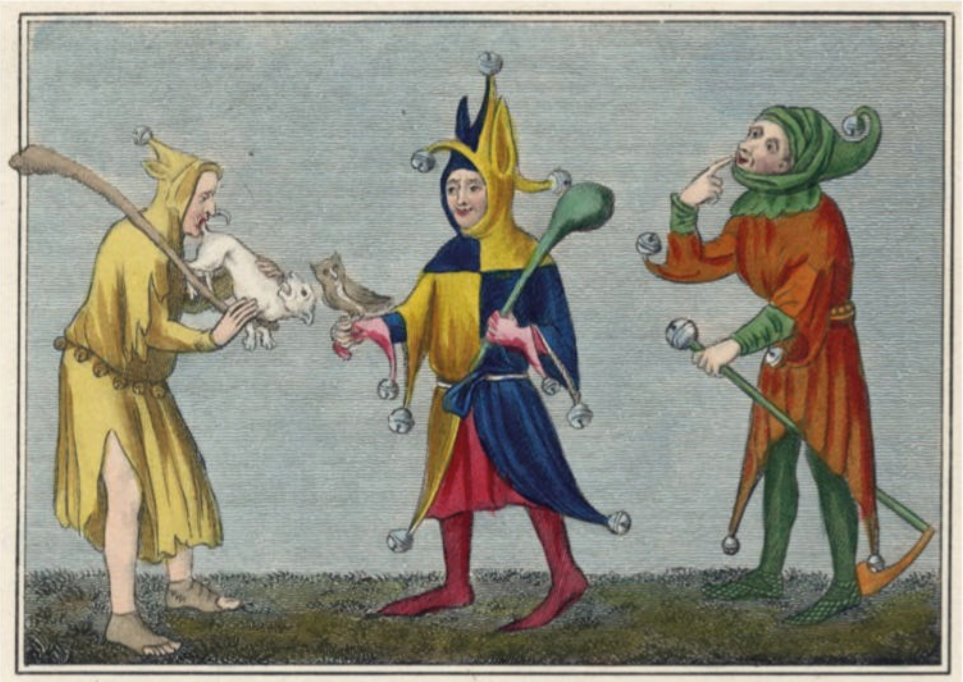




Playing the fool for royalty and the nobility has a long history, and for those who split a monarch's sides with laughter the rewards could be considerable professional comedic effect. The former had courtly keepers to look after them, and their royal patrons often seem to have been genuinely fond of them.

An innocent called Sexton, one of many Tudor court fools, was gifted to Henry VIII by Cardinal Wolsey when the cleric was trying to get back into the king's favour. Sexton had keepers to take care of his every need from food and 'posset ale' (spiced milk curdled with ale) to new clothes in time for Christmas 1529, including worsted doublet and hose lined with sarcenet (soft silk) as well as a wig, all amounting to well over £5. Most court fools wore the attire of favoured retainers rather than multicoloured motley with hood and bells, which was a costume more associated with traditions of amateur 'fool societies' (particularly popular in France) and literature.

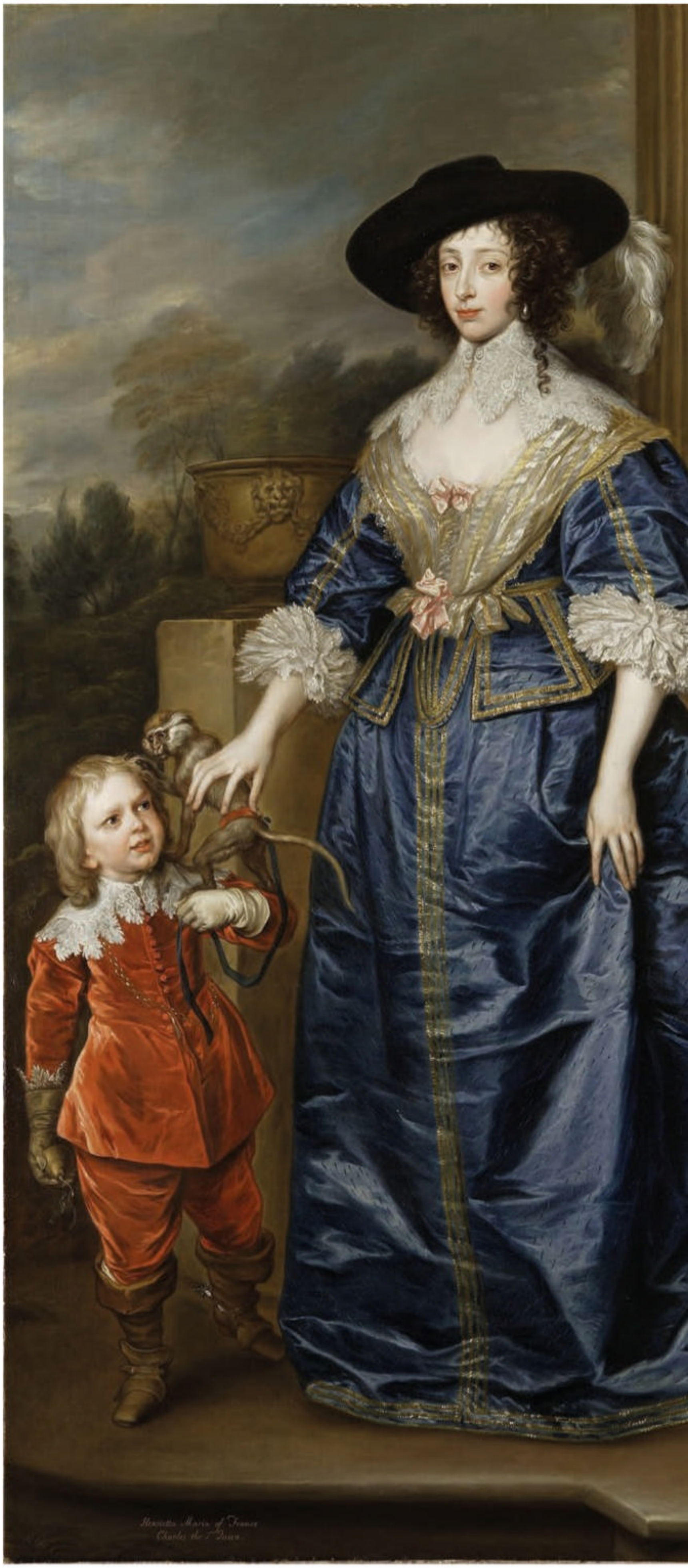
Innocent fools with their lack of guile were believed to be nearer to God and the truth, and were valued for their directness and humour – they could blurt out what others thought but dared not say. William Somer who succeeded Sexton became renowned for his pointed remarks; once, when Henry was bemoaning the ever-empty royal coffers, he told the King: "As please your Grace, you have so many frauditers, so many conveyers and so many deceivers to get up your money, that they get all to themselves." The perhaps less-than-innocent 'slip of the tongue' in reference to auditors, surveyors and receivers gave Henry pause for thought that he was being exploited rather than helped by those around him.

Will entertained Henry at Christmas, receiving a New Year gift of spurs after one such occasion, and he continued to be a popular fool during the reigns of Edward VI and Mary, dressing up at one revelry in a "harniss of paper boordes" (cardboard armour) for a mock combat devised by King Edward.

It is a telling insight into Will's special position that he appears in several royal portraits, in particular the painting (c 1545) of the 'ideal' Family of Henry VIII featuring the king, his (then-deceased) third wife Jane Seymour, son Edward, and daughters Mary and Elizabeth. Will, crop-haired and hunched, stands with a monkey on his shoulder in an archway, while a second figure, believed to be 'Jane the Fole' is glimpsed through another arch.

Jane, too, lived through several Tudor reigns. She was given a small flock of poultry to care for and was attired in pretty gowns, though numerous bills for shaving

***Clockwise from right: Queen Henrietta Maria of France (1609–69) and her dwarf, Jeffery Hudson (1619–82)* after Sir Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), on display at Petworth House in West Sussex; *Dance of Fools* (print) by the English School (13th century); 16th-century French engraving of a jester**



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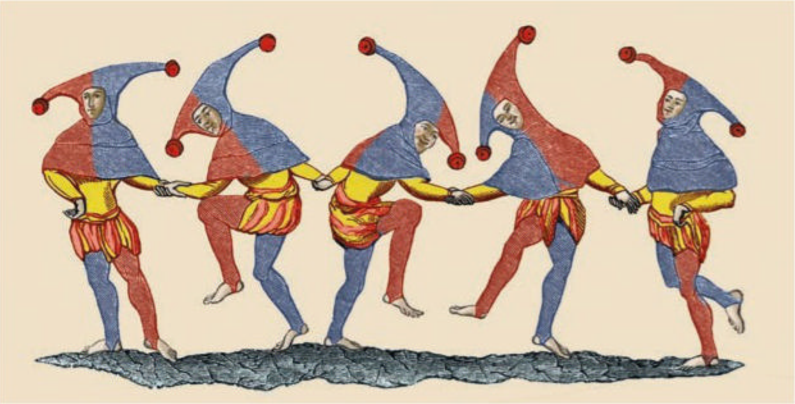
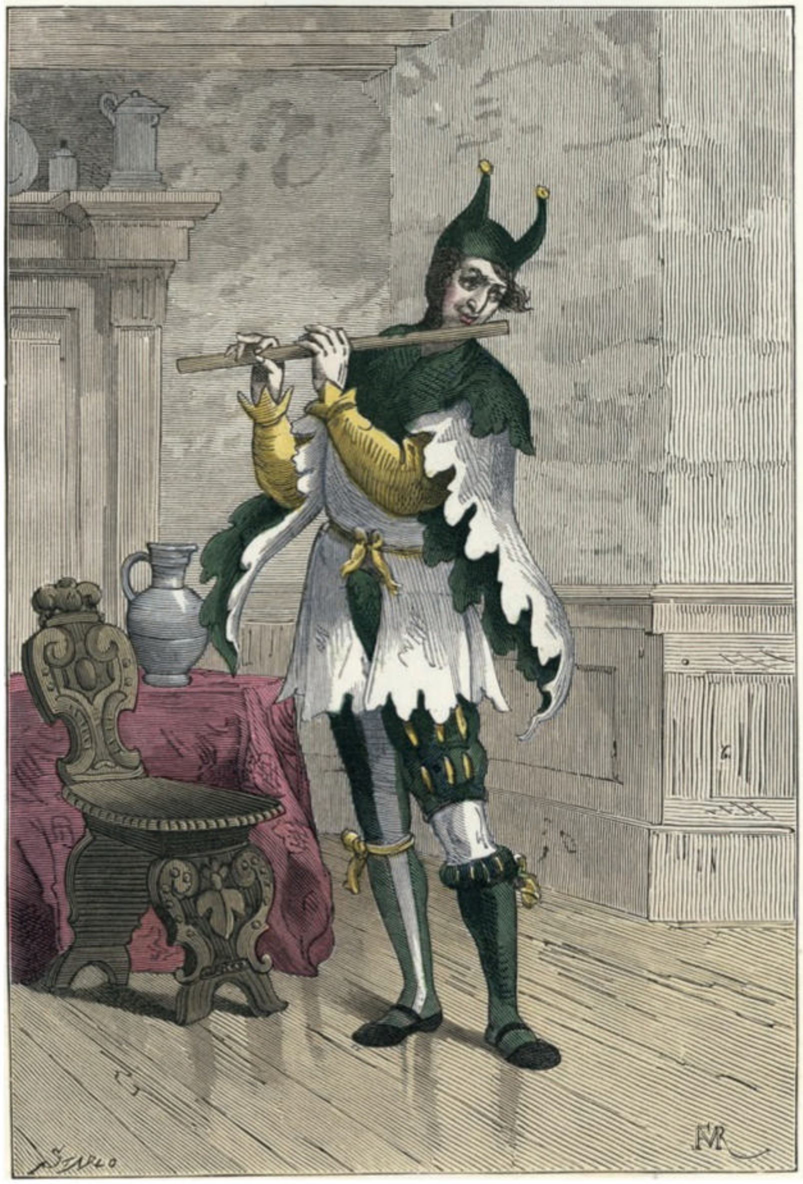


Elizabeth I's fool was the one person guaranteed able to 'undumpish' her when she was out of humour



her head suggest she may have suffered some sort of ailment.

Elizabeth I preferred artificial fools to innocents. Her favourite, Richard Tarlton, was the one person guaranteed able to 'undumpish' her when she was out of humour. Known for his funny facial expressions, Tarlton was in the vanguard of jesters who began to step away from the court and take to the public stage. He became a leading comic actor of the Queen's Men, excelled in the role of a rustic clown, danced jigs and played a tabor (small drum) and pipe. The Queen's Men performed at court on or around Boxing Day, and elsewhere for public audiences through the rest of the year.

While actors like William Kempe and Robert Armin made their names in fool parts created for the stage by William Shakespeare, a few individuals still made a mark in the tradition of court fools. One such was Jeffery Hudson, a handsome, perfectly proportioned "rarity of nature" who stopped growing at around three feet tall and literally burst onto the royal scene when he jumped out of a pie presented by the Duke of Buckingham to King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria at a banquet.

A charming oil painting by Van Dyck shows the affectionate bond that developed between the queen and 'Sir' Jeffery, who was educated in the royal household, and became a skilled horseman and talented dancer. In one famed skit another "rarity", a Welsh giant called William Evans, pulled a loaf of bread and Jeffery from his pocket and proceeded to make a sandwich.

Alas, Jeffery's fortunes nosedived in his 20s when, during the English Civil War, he was in exile in France with Henrietta Maria. Fed up with jokes about his stature, he challenged a noble to a duel and subsequently shot his antagonist dead. Banished, he was captured by pirates, sold into slavery, liberated, caught up in the 'Popish Plot' during the reign of Charles II, and imprisoned. He died aged 63 shortly after his release in 1682. And apparently, during his various misadventures, he gained a foot in height.

Fools would continue to make merry in the homes of the nobility for some time to come, but their court-maintained counterparts had essentially raised their last laughs as Restoration culture under Charles II looked to the theatre for entertainment. The antics of the likes of Roland le Pettour, Will Somer, Richard Tarlton and Jeffery Hudson nevertheless immortalised what once tickled royal ribs.

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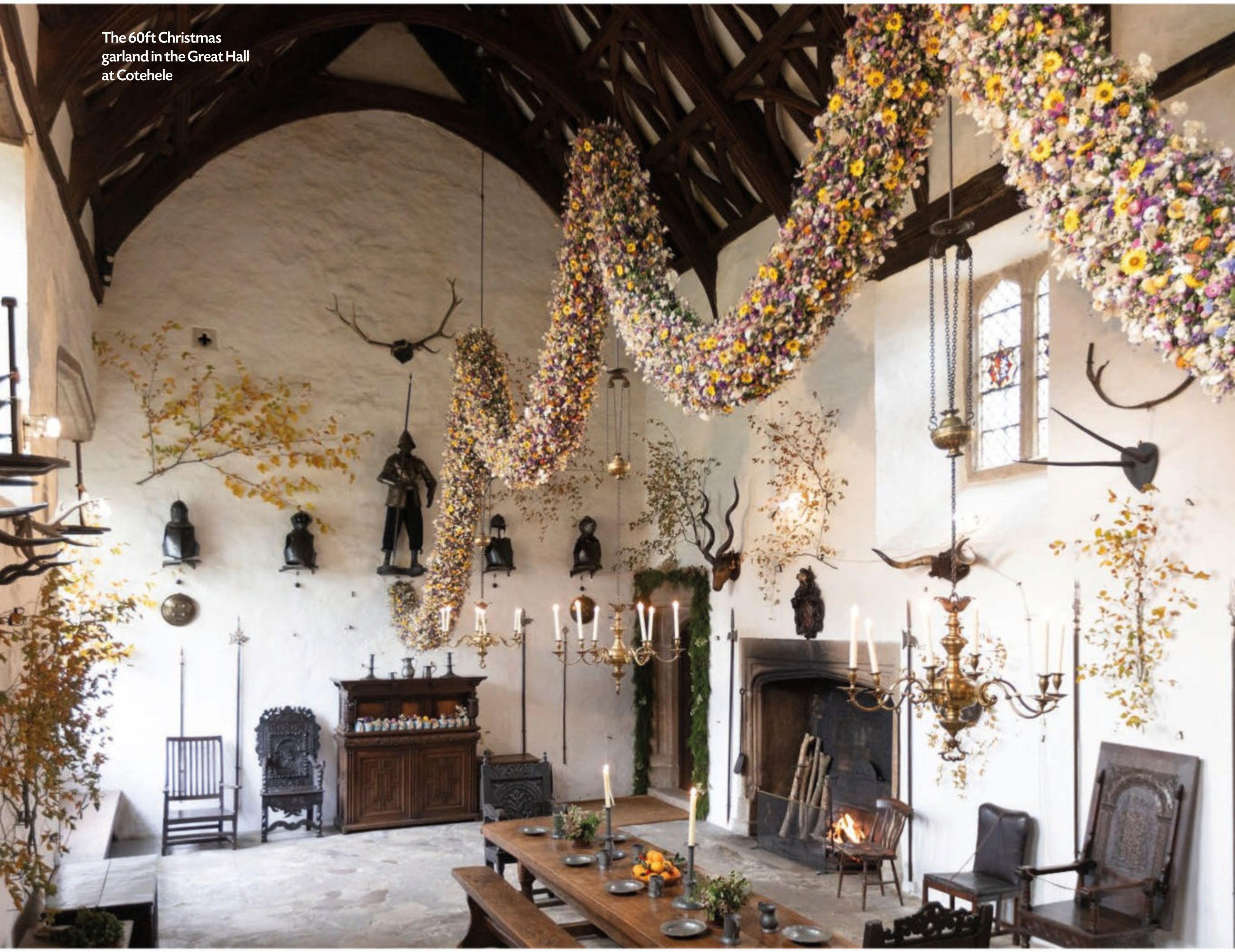

The 60ft Christmas garland in the Great Hall at Cotehele

A CORNISH WINTER

From blustery coastal walks and storm-watching to foodie festivals beside the twinkling harbour lights, winter in Cornwall has a special kind of magic

WORDS **FELIX ROWE**

PHOTOS: © JAMES BECK/NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES

For many, it's hard to imagine anything more idyllic than Cornwall on a summer's day: sun-drenched beaches, bustling harbour towns and rolling green hills that spill into the sea. But as autumn fades and winter settles in, the county reveals a different kind of beauty: quieter, moodier and deeply atmospheric. It's the perfect time of year to visit and enjoy Cornwall at a gentler pace, with space to appreciate its timeless landscapes.

Britain's most southwesterly region approaches winter with its own particular spirit. With its mild climate, Cornwall is the perfect destination for those looking to escape the winter chill. Snowfall is a rarity here – so much so that The Nare, a country house hotel on the Roseland Peninsula, offers guests a complimentary stay should flakes ever settle on its manicured lawns.

For anyone venturing here in the colder months – be it for the festive season or simply to enjoy a winter retreat – Cornwall offers rewards far beyond the summer postcard scenes. The beaches, usually teeming with visitors, lie open and silent, and those who head out beyond the well-worn paths may well find a secluded stretch all to themselves.

As the nights draw in, Cornwall's natural beauty is beguiling: the moors glow bronze with bracken, and sunsets tinge the sea russet red. Hiking trails, whether blustery stretches of the South West Coast Path or through the hush of wooded valleys, present the perfect setting for a leisurely walk, followed by a hearty fireside meal in a cosy pub.

Historic houses come into their own in winter, and none more so than Lanhydrock. The Grade I-listed house, refashioned by the celebrated architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, recreates the opulence of a Victorian country house at Christmas. The grand manor is decked out with twinkling decorations and tables set for a lavish banquet. Visitors can warm up around the huge roaring fire, follow the scent of spices drifting from the colossal kitchen and take part in Christmas-themed craft activities.

Over on the River Tamar, the Tudor manor Cotehele is home to a quieter, though no less impressive, tradition: its 60-foot garland, handmade every year from flowers grown in the estate's gardens. Preparation is a year-round labour of love, with seeds sown in January, and flowers harvested in spring and dried throughout the summer and autumn. The result is a sight to behold.

The poet Dylan Thomas called Mousehole (pronounced 'Mow-zul') "the loveliest village in England", and it's hard not to agree. Winding cobbled streets lined with fishermen's cottages lead down to the picturesque harbour, which glows at Christmas with ▶

Clockwise from right: **Christmas kitchen at Lanhydrock; Trebah, one of Cornwall's many subtropical gardens, glinting with frost; Mousehole Christmas lights**

PHOTOS: © JOHN MILLAR/NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES/DAVID CHAPMAN/ANDREW RAY/ALAMY

MOUSEHOLE
HARBOUR LIGHTS

Winding cobbled streets lead down to the picturesque harbour, which glows at Christmas with the Mousehole Lights the Mousehole Lights. It's a festive display with a difference, as huge floating installations shimmer across the water of Mount's Bay. Another local tradition, on 23 December, sees a giant 'stargazy pie', with fish heads poking out of the pastry, paraded through the village with lanterns and song before being eaten to celebrate the end of the winter's storms. The event commemorates a 16th-century fisherman, Tom Bawcock, who set sail in a raging storm to catch enough fish to save the village from starvation.

Those in search of seasonal markets will find plenty to explore, from bustling Truro to quieter Carbis Bay. You might pick up a wedge of Cornish Yarg, a mellow, flavoursome cheese encased in nettle leaves – the perfect accompaniment to a West Country chutney; jewellery from Cornwall Gold; or sea-glass and driftwood homewares from artisan makers. Foodies head to Padstow's Christmas Fayre, featuring demonstrations from top chefs Rick Stein and Paul Ainsworth. Fowey Christmas Market, in Daphne du Maurier's home town, has also become an essential calendar fixture. Santa has no need for his sleigh here, instead arriving in style by boat, accompanied in a street procession by the town band and a small army of elves.

Anyone who finds themselves missing the reindeer can visit the ancient deer park at Prideaux Place, an Elizabethan manor near Padstow, to get up close to the resident herd of deer and watch as they graze against the backdrop of the Camel Estuary. ▶

Cornwall's many subtropical gardens take on a dreamlike quality in winter, lit up with vibrant light shows and temporary sculptures

Below: **The Eden Project's iconic biomes, lit up for the festive season; stunning clifftop views from the open-air Minack Theatre**

PHOTOS: © EDEN PROJECT/SEBASTIAN WASEK/ALAMY

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Left, from top: Immersive *Winter Wood* performance staged by Rogue Otherworld in Tehidy Woods; a cosy harbourside inn, Polperro

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Cornwall's subtropical gardens take on a dreamlike quality in winter, lit up with vibrant light shows and temporary sculptures. The Heligan Night Garden has won awards for its displays, while the Eden Project's iconic biomes transform into glowing jungles, complete with a festive ice rink and immersive light installations.

Several companies present a traditional Christmas panto, including, this winter, Aladdin at Truro's recently restored Hall For Cornwall. There are also thrilling open-air performances at the clifftop Minack Theatre and in the atmospheric setting of Tehidy Woods, staged by the Rogue Otherworld theatre group.

Many of Cornwall's greatest assets can be enjoyed for the price of a packed lunch and a little imagination. Winter walks that wind towards abandoned tin mines, for example; seal-spotting at Godrevy Cove; or even storm-watching. There's something primal about witnessing the seas rage as the spray explodes against the rocks (preferably from the comfort of a harbourside tavern with a glass of mulled cider in hand).

For the brave, no Cornish winter is complete without a bracing swim on Boxing Day or New Year's Day – no wetsuits allowed. Warm up afterwards in one of several beachside log-fired saunas, from Harlyn Bay to Falmouth's Gylly Beach.

When it comes to preparing the traditional Christmas lunch, Cornwall is a foodie haven, with all the ingredients you could need produced locally. But there's a simpler alternative that feels just as festive: a warm, hand-crimped Cornish pasty, eaten on the beach with the wind in your hair. Some bakeries even offer a seasonal pasty loaded with turkey, stuffing and cranberry sauce. Merry Christmas! Or, as they say in Cornwall, 'Nadelik Lowen!'

There's something primal about witnessing the seas rage as the spray explodes against the rocks – preferably from the comfort of a harbourside tavern

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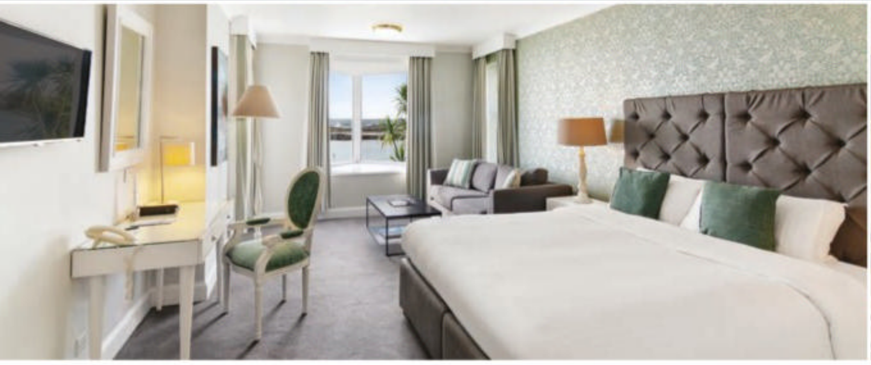

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Secrets of the THAMES

With every tide, mudlarks uncover lost treasures from the River Thames, offering intimate glimpses into the everyday lives of Londoners across the centuries

WORDS **MALCOLM SMITH**

Previous page: A bosun's whistle found by a mudlark; mudlarking on the Thames foreshore *This page, from top:* Fake 'antiquity' from the Victorian era, among a number of artefacts known as 'Billy and Charleys'; medieval pilgrim badge; a tripod toy cauldron *Opposite, clockwise from top:* Mudlarked items in the exhibition include a Viking-era knife; a gold finger ring; a set of false teeth; a medieval badge; a pair of spectacles

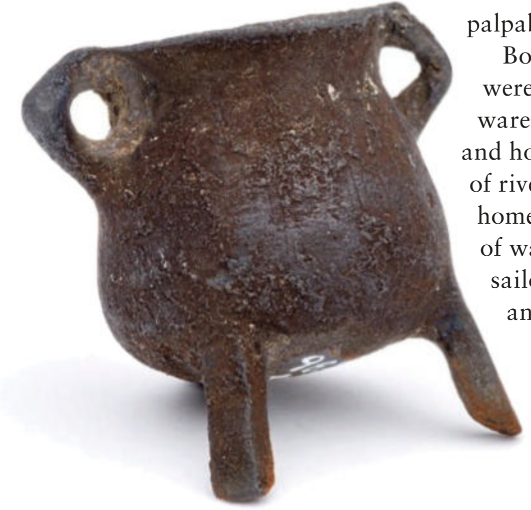
Stonehenge, Sutton Hoo, Vindolanda: some of the best-known sites revealing Britain's incredible archeological heritage. Another, less celebrated but equally revealing site meanders through the very heart of London: the River Thames. At low tide, its mud and gravel banks expose a constantly shifting archeological record. Thousands of amateur archeologists – known as mudlarks – scour its foreshore for lost treasures, now the centrepiece of *Secrets of the Thames*, a fascinating exhibition at London Museum Docklands.

The exhibition features over 350 mudlarked objects, many displayed for the first time. Some are personal items, like the iron knife inlaid with silver, thought to belong to a Saxon settler arriving a thousand years ago. Others are poignant, such as a black enamel and gold mourning ring from 1670, inscribed "Oh my sister, my sister", a stark reminder of loss and memory in centuries past.

The scope of the finds is extraordinary. From Bronze Age swords and Roman glass beads to more than 250 ancient human skeletal remains – including the skull of a 5,500-year-old Neolithic man – the river reveals layers of human history. But it's not all dramatic artefacts: there's a cornucopia of everyday items too, from cufflinks, coins and wig curlers to badges, shoes and shards of pottery. Even 18th-century Chinese porcelain finds its way into the Thames, stirred up by tides and river traffic.

Bolly May, a licensed mudlark for more than a decade, describes her first time on the foreshore as life-changing. "It opened up a new world to me; the anticipation of what I might find," she says. "Within a week, I'd applied for a mudlarking permit from the Port of London Authority." Her most prized discovery? A large, amethyst-studded gold Tudor finger ring, likely worn over leather gloves as a display of wealth. "I noticed it partially protruding from the mud," she says. "It's surreal to see it on posters in the Underground. Each time I think: I found that!"

The Thames foreshore, even in the bustle of central London, offers unexpected tranquillity. "It's where I go to chill," May adds. "Descending the steps is like descending into a bygone world – a palpable connection to the past."



Both sides of the Thames were once packed with docks, warehouses, fish markets, pubs and houses. This vibrant stretch of riverfront was for centuries home to thriving communities of watermen, stevedores, sailors, merchants, fishermen and shipbuilders.

Little wonder, then, that objects have been dropped by accident into its turbid waters from bridges and riverbanks, and from the huge numbers of

▶

PHOTOS: © JOHN CHASE/LONDON MUSEUM

commercial ships and pleasure boats plying the river. Other objects might have been discarded as rubbish, secreted as booty near the water's edge by criminals and never retrieved, washed out of the pockets of dead bodies or even 'given' to the river as religious offerings.

The exhibition doesn't shy away from mudlarking's darker origins. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was the desperate preserve of the poor, with children and the elderly trawling the filthy river for coal, rope, scrap metal or bones to sell. The Thames then was dangerous and disease-ridden, its waters littered with corpses and waste. The 19th-century social commentator Henry Mayhew described mudlarks as "compelled from utter destitution to seek for the means of appeasing their hunger in the mud of the river."

Times have (thankfully) changed. Mudlarking is now strictly regulated by the Port of London Authority. Only 4,000 permits are active at a time, covering both shores from Teddington to the Thames Barrier. While some mudlarks use metal detectors, most just rely on their eyes, intuition, and a small trowel.

The Thames's anaerobic mud preserves objects in extraordinary condition, and London's long history as a port and settlement makes it one of Britain's richest archeological sites. "It's a rare combination," explains exhibition curator Kate Sumnall. "The river is at the heart of a global city inhabited since Roman times."

The museum records around 700 of the most important finds annually. "These discoveries have modified our understanding of aspects of London life," says Sumnall. For example, the river has yielded many tiny pewter toys – miniature ships, furniture and anchors – challenging the idea that medieval children, especially from poor families, had no access to playthings. "Maybe they played with them on the banks," Sumnall speculates, "or swapped them like today's football cards."

The River Thames offers something unique: a living archive, where history surfaces with every ebb and flow of the tide. And for mudlarks, each low tide brings the possibility of discovery, of uncovering something once forgotten, now ready to tell its story once again.

From top: **Sundial, c 1550–1650; exhibition curator Kate Sumnall with *Finders Keepers* by sculptor Billie Bond**

PLAN AHEAD

Secrets of the Thames is on display at the London Museum Docklands until 1 March. Book an after-hours tour to delve into the forgotten stories of the city's mudlarks. *londonmuseum.org.uk*

See our website **discoverbritain.com** for more on London's fascinating history

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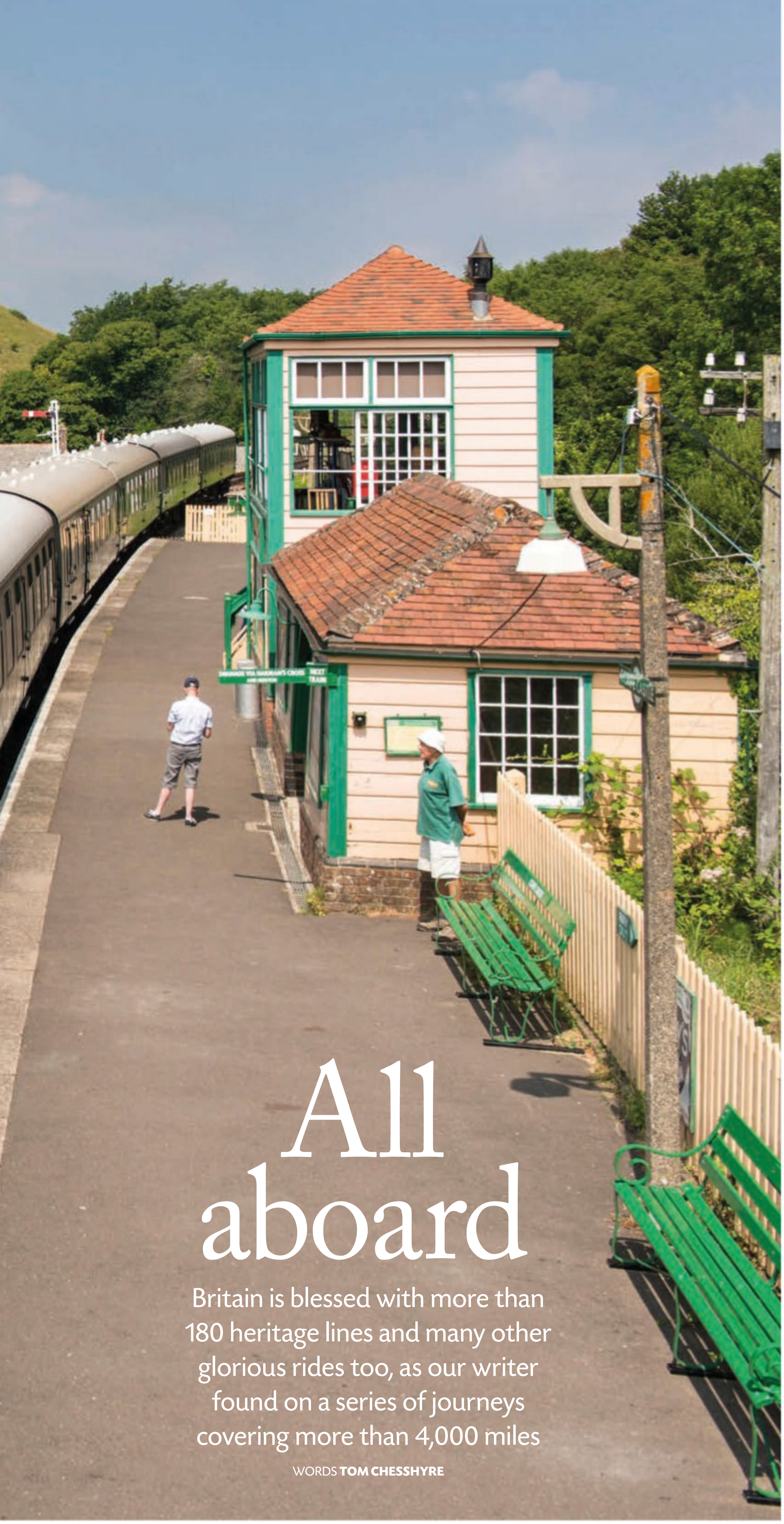

PHOTO: © MIKE ROBINSON (UK)/ALAMY

All aboard

Britain is blessed with more than 180 heritage lines and many other glorious rides too, as our writer found on a series of journeys covering more than 4,000 miles

WORDS **TOM CHESSHYRE**

Chugging down the five-and-a-half-mile Swanage Railway towards the coast in Dorset in southwest England, you are treated to perhaps the most awe-inspiring sight from any train in Britain, though that's open to debate (there are so many). After your steam train slowly rattles along from Norden station, hissing, hooting and emitting great plumes of sulphur-smelling vapours, the jagged ruins of a classic medieval castle arise on a hillock to the right. You're getting a close-up view of Corfe Castle, built by William the Conqueror in the 11th century, although it was previously the site of a residence where Edward the Martyr, the king of England, is believed to have been brutally assassinated aged 16 in AD 978.

Heritage trains and history all seem rolled into one here, and it's even more enjoyable if you pay extra for a cab ride in the old locomotive pulling the carriages, so you can see the scenery emerging directly ahead. The driver will let you add coal to the furnace fuelling the loco, and pull the cable connected to the whistle, too.

The first passenger steam train sliding along the track of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, in northeast England, was on 27 September 1825, with Victorian rail pioneer George Stephenson at the controls, no less. The nation that invented ▶

trains 200 years ago remains full of rail thrills all these years on.

On a long series of recent rides – 143 in total, covering 4,088 miles along Britain's tracks – for a travel book entitled *Slow Trains Around Britain*, there were numerous highlights.

Many of these can be enjoyed on more than 180 heritage railways, run by a 20,000-plus army of volunteers, aka 'rail enthusiasts', with a few self-confessed 'trainspotters' among their number: those who use their spare time to hang out on platforms of mainline stations waiting to take note of whatever rolls along the tracks (sometimes even recording loco and carriage numbers).

Though not falling into that category myself, after so many rides around my home nation I began at least to understand where they are coming from, though it was the vintage railways that remained most vividly in the mind, rather than the mainline services.

If you do take the Swanage Railway, a stop-off at Corfe Castle station is a must, with its quirky second-hand rail paraphernalia shop and ticket office, complete with a real fire, adorned with original railway posters. It's like stepping into the past – a century ago, perhaps. And the quaint village with its tea shops and cosy pubs by the entrance to the grounds of the castle itself makes a perfect spot for lunch.

Elsewhere, another of my favourites was the North Yorkshire Moors Railway, covering 18 miles between Grosmont and Pickering. Originally opened in 1836 by Stephenson himself, it was closed during cutbacks ordered by Dr Richard Beeching, a former chairman of British Railways, in 1965. Volunteers stepped in to reopen the

Previous page: **Corfe Castle station**
Clockwise from left: **The North Yorkshire Moors Railway; Holt station, Norfolk; Welsh Highland Railway, Snowdonia**

PHOTOS: © ROBERT HARDING/ALAMY/2019 YACKERS1/SHUTTERSTOCK/VISIT WALES

line in 1973 – and it's a superb experience. The train, pulled by a steam locomotive, winds between rolling landscape strewn with bracken and dotted with silver birch and pine trees, following streams along the way. Moorland rises all around. Deer dart here and there, and owls sit on branches watching your progress.

Then you have the West Somerset Railway, which rattles for 23 enjoyable miles between Bishops Lydeard and the seaside town of Minehead, facing the Bristol Channel – with some exhilarating sections overlooking the coastline. It's the longest standard gauge (4ft 8.5in) heritage railway in the UK, dating originally from 1862 and then closing in 1971 before reopening in 1976. Another example of a resurrection of old tracks.

The Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railway, in north Wales, was a particular favourite. I caught a train on the mainline up to the old slate mining town of Blaenau Ffestiniog, altitude 850ft, which has a population of 4,000 and was once nicknamed the 'City of Slates'. From here, I joined the heritage railway, which wound out of the town clinging to tiny tracks.

On this ride it was relaxing simply to let the wheels roll and watch the dramatic scenery unfold as the carriage creaked and swayed, passing above settlements of terraced houses in which quarry-workers once lived, traversing ink-black reservoirs and woodlands of ancient oak trees clinging to slopes. The train ends up in Porthmadog station, down by the coast, where there's an excellent restaurant/pub named Spooner's, named after James Spooner, who built the railway between 1832 and 1836.

Other lovely heritage railways I visited include the Isle of Wight Steam Railway, ▶

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Clockwise from top left: **Step back in time at Corfe Castle station; vintage elegance in an Isle of Wight Steam Railway carriage; heritage trains on the Bluebell Railway, in Sussex; the Isle of Wight Steam Railway**

the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway in Kent, and the North Norfolk Railway, which you catch from the pleasant seaside market town of Sheringham. On the last of those, nicknamed the Poppy Line after the flowers that grow alongside the tracks, you follow the coast and cross green, rolling countryside, pulled by a steam locomotive built in 1956 by the Hunslet Engine Co in Leeds. The route ends in the suitably named market town of Holt, where there's a museum of trains on the platform.

What about great mainline rides in Britain? Well, the journey from Exeter to Plymouth, closely following the coast, and weaving between cliffs, is a good one. Then you have the 10-minute ride from St Erth to St Ives in Cornwall, travelling along cliffs, with sweeps of sandy coves below. The ride from Craven Arms to Llanelli in the south of Wales, known as the Heart of Wales Line, cuts through beautiful countryside.

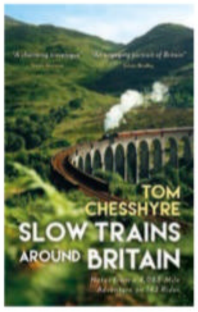
Then there's the Caledonian Sleeper: a wonderful experience, departing in the evening from London Euston and arriving in Scotland – either at Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fort William or Aberdeen – in the morning, with terrific dining carriages on board. I took the service to Aberdeen, before continuing onwards to Inverness and then Thurso, Britain's most northerly station. Crossing remote moorland, I felt far removed from everyday life 'down south'.

British trains aren't without their flaws: delays are not uncommon, and ticket prices can be high, especially if booked at the last moment. But for all that, the magic of rail travel here endures.

Whether it's the sweeping coastal views on a mainline journey or the nostalgic charm of a steam-powered heritage line, it's still possible to step back in time and experience the golden age of travel. And for that, we can be truly grateful. B

BUY THE BOOK

Tom Chesshyre is the author of *Slow Trains Around Britain: Notes from a 4,088-Mile Adventure on 143 Rides,* published by Summersdale (£20, *summersdale.com*).



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Remember, remember

We delve into the fiery history of Britain's biggest Bonfire Night celebration, which takes place in the unassuming Sussex town of Lewes

WORDS **HENRIETTA EASTON**

A newcomer to Lewes would have a hard time believing that, once a year, this pretty town with its cobbled streets, higgledy-piggledy houses and cosy coffee shops transforms into the stage for Britain's most dramatic and infamous Guy Fawkes Night celebration.

Tucked into a sweeping valley in the East Sussex South Downs, Lewes is home to a ruined medieval priory, a Norman castle and the Anne of Cleves House – gifted to her after her marriage to Henry VIII. The area was once a rural outpost of the Bloomsbury Group, and it's also where revolutionary thinker Thomas Paine penned *The Rights of Man*, a work that would go on to influence both the American and French Revolutions.

The world-famous Lewes Bonfire Night is just another string to the town's historic bow. 'Remember, remember the fifth of November', as the children's rhyme goes, and there's no forgetting Bonfire Night in Lewes. Beyond the traditional bonfire and fireworks, the evening features an extraordinary torchlit procession with burning crosses, flaming barrels and effigies carried through the town's narrow streets. Lewes's celebration not only commemorates the Gunpowder Plot, but also honours 17 Protestant martyrs from the town that were burned at the stake during the reign of Queen Mary I. Their execution site is marked today by a plaque outside the Lewes Council Building.

Like bonfire nights across Britain, the origins of the celebration date back to 5 November 1605, when a failed Catholic plot to blow up King James I in Parliament was uncovered. Soon after, 'An Acte for a publique Thanksgiving to Almighty God every year of the Fifth day of November' was passed, which held that the day should be celebrated annually in perpetual remembrance of the plot. Across the country, church bells rang out followed by

PHOTOS: © LFP/ALAMY/NIGEL FRENCH/VISIT LEWES

services of thanksgiving and bonfires in the street to commemorate the 300 martyrs burned at the stake under Catholic rule.

But why does such a seemingly genteel town host such an unruly celebration? In Lewes, the burning of effigies began after the 'Popish Plot' in 1678: a fabricated conspiracy by priest Titus Oates, who falsely claimed that Catholics planned to assassinate King Charles II and overthrow the government. The lie gripped England in anti-Catholic hysteria for several years before Oates was finally rumbled and thrown in prison.

The first recorded Bonfire Night parade in Lewes took place on 5 November 1679, when young armed men carried images of the Pope, Guy Fawkes and other 'enemies' on long poles through the streets.

From the 1800s onwards, Lewes's Bonfire Night took on an increasingly rebellious and political tone. Gangs nicknamed the Bonfire Boys used the annual celebration as an opportunity for civil disobedience and a rallying point to protest against authority. Many of them were disenfranchised soldiers who had returned from the Napoleonic Wars to poverty and hardship. Adopting striped smuggler's jumpers as their uniform and darkening their faces to avoid recognition, they were inspired by political reformists like Thomas Paine. The Lewes bonfire societies still wear these striped jumpers to this day.

By 1832 the celebrations had become so unruly that police issued hundreds of prohibition notices. Blazing tar barrels were dragged through the timber-framed streets of Lewes's affluent centre to make bonfires, threatening the lives and livelihood of the ruling classes. In 1847, London police forces were drafted in to control the Bonfire Boys.

When the Pope restored Catholic bishops in England in 1850, the Bonfire Boys responded with fury, burning effigies of the Pope once again alongside signs proclaiming 'No Popery Here'. The same year, they marked the spot where the Lewes Martyrs were burned and marched through the town with burning crosses.

What began as a dark and dangerous display of rebellion has evolved into a proud celebration of the town's history

In 1853 the first two bonfire societies were established: the Cliffe Bonfire Society and what is now the Lewes Borough Bonfire Society. After years of trying to prevent the yearly riots, the authorities grudgingly accepted the annual chaos.

***Opposite:* Lewes's Waterloo Bonfire Society parades through the streets *Below, from left:* The Norman castle's Barbican Gate; view of the town watched over by its imposing castle**

Those attending the event today experience many of the same traditions. Seventeen burning crosses are carried through the town and a wreath-laying ceremony takes place at the War Memorial. Ladies' and men's races to pull a flaming tar barrel thunder down Cliffe High Street, and a flaming barrel is thrown into the River Ouse to symbolise the throwing of the magistrates into the river after they had read the Riot Act to the Bonfire Boys in 1847.

The festivities culminate in separate bonfire and fireworks displays run by the seven different societies. Effigies are still paraded through the streets before being burned. Each year these include Guy Fawkes, Pope Paul V – the Pope in 1605 – and any current 'Enemies of Bonfire'. For safety reasons roads and rail lines into the town are closed at 3pm on 5 November; those wanting to join in from further afield can watch a livestream of the processions from the comfort of their sofa by tuning into Rocket FM on YouTube.

What began as a dark and dangerous display of rebellion has evolved into a proud and spectacular celebration of the town's history and independent spirit. Perhaps most remarkable of all is that after a night of burning crosses, flaming barrels and cursing at enemies, the town transforms back into its charming, well-mannered self. That is, until the fire is lit again the next year.

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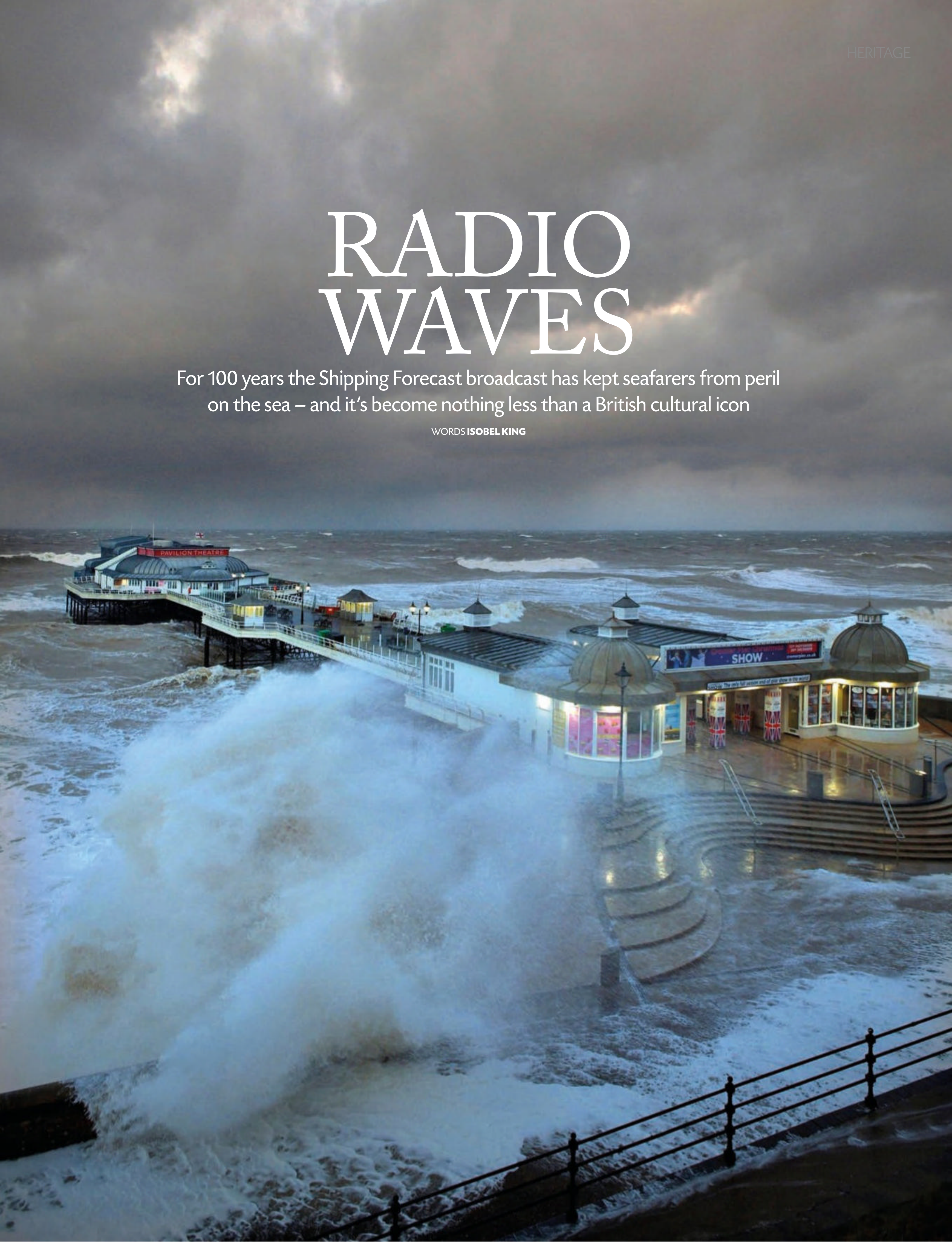
RADIO WAVES

For 100 years the Shipping Forecast broadcast has kept seafarers from peril on the sea – and it's become nothing less than a British cultural icon

WORDS **ISOBEL KING**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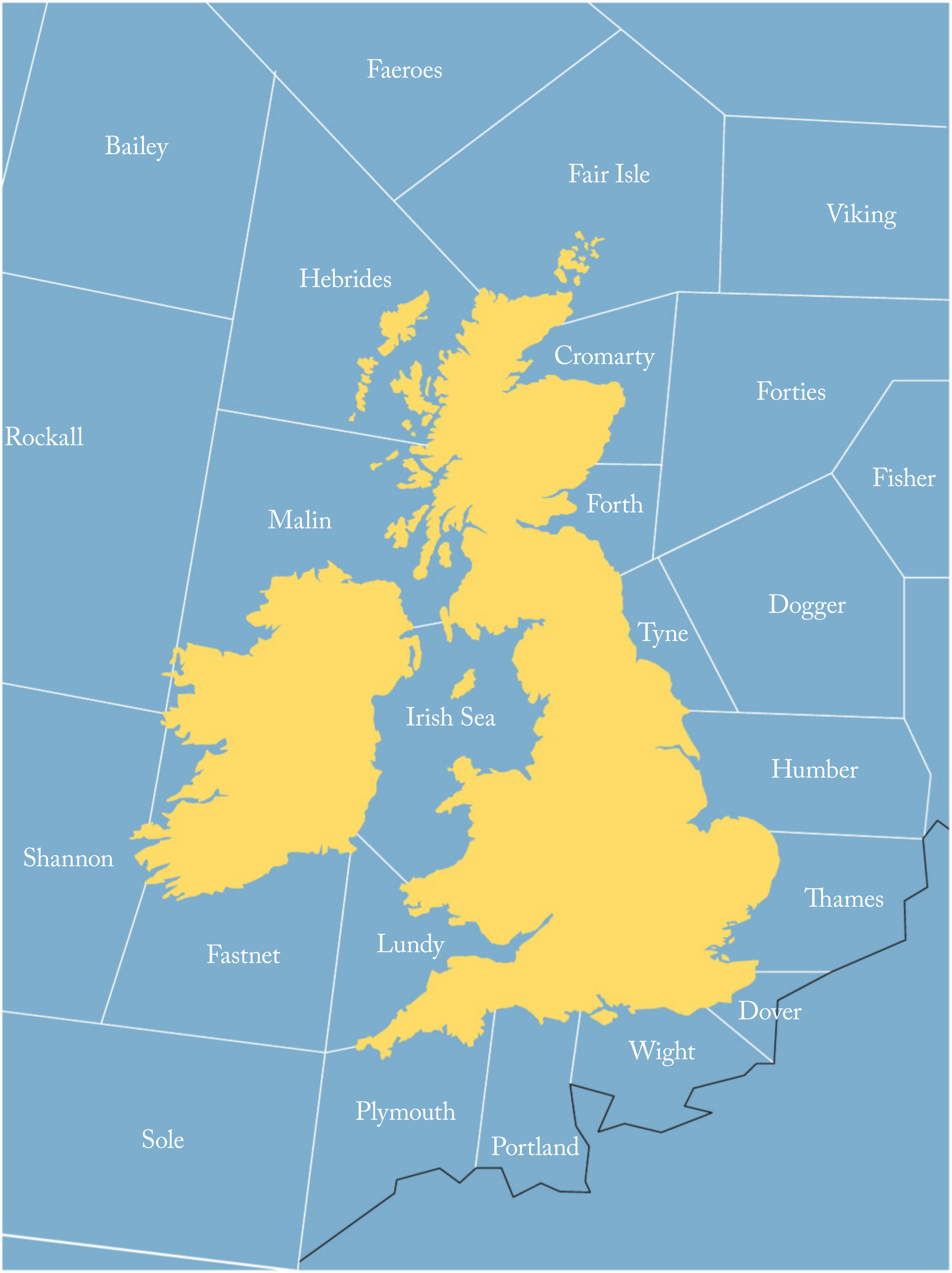
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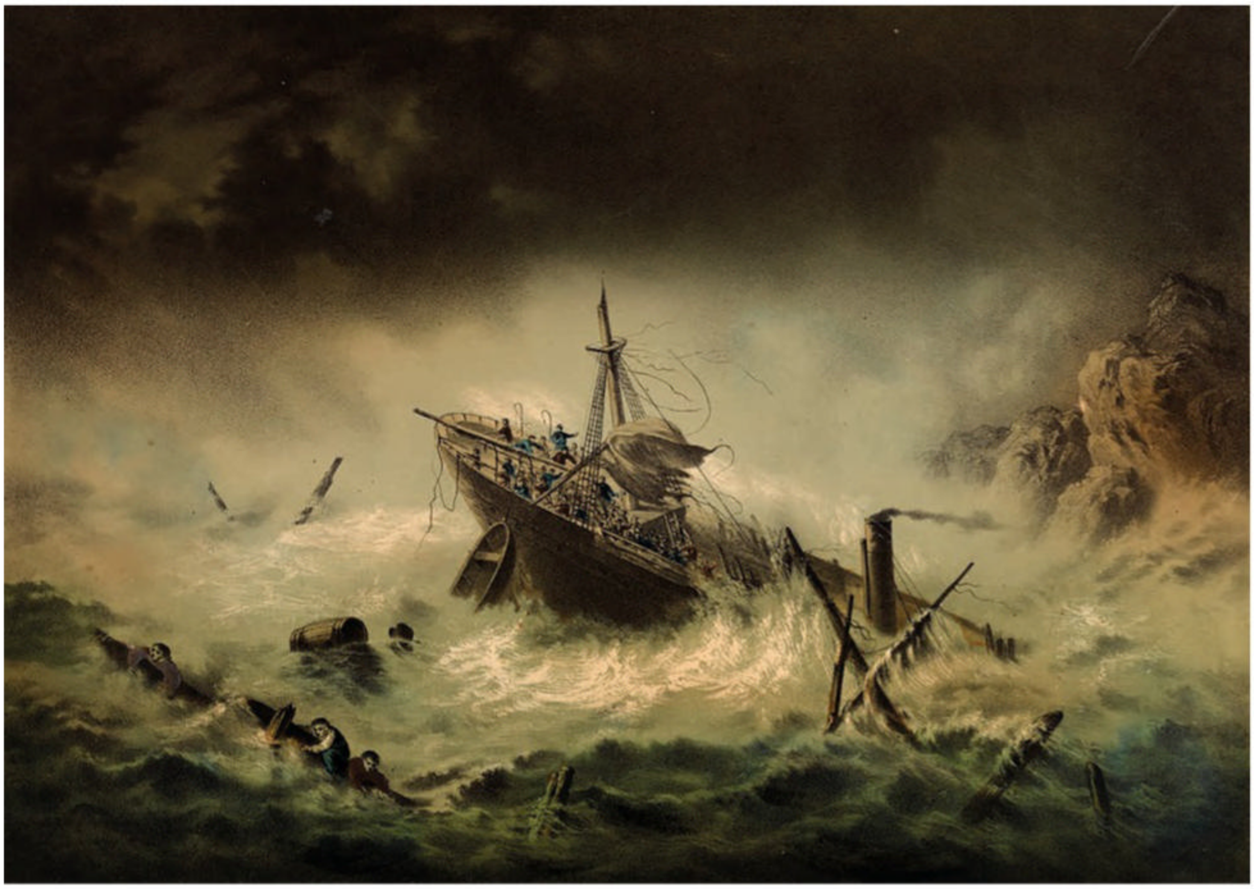

Previous page: **Coastal storm battering Cromer Pier, Norfolk** *From far left:* **The Shipping Forecast sea areas;** ***Loss of the Royal Charter*** **by an unknown artist, in the collection of London's National Maritime Museum**

"It's part of the fabric of this intangible thing called Britishness," radio presenter Zeb Soanes once observed. "Just like red telephone boxes, Wimbledon, the chimes of Big Ben, the smell of cut grass, scones and jam."

Soanes was being interviewed by the BBC about the Shipping Forecast – something he knows intimately, having announced the programme for a stretch of 20 years. These specialist weather reports for the waters around the British Isles, produced by the Meteorological Office on behalf of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, have for a century now enabled seafarers to chart a safe course. But its calm, measured rhythms have long since drifted beyond the sea, anchoring themselves deep in the national imagination and offering reassurance to a legion of listeners.

The Shipping Forecast has inspired the verse of poets as esteemed as Slyvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Roger McGough and former Laureate Carol Ann Duffy; featured in the London 2012 Olympic Games opening ceremony; interrupted commentary at nail-biting closing stages of sporting events, to go ahead as scheduled; and, thanks to its repetition and rhythm – the announcer's voice rising and falling like the lapping tide – many of us find that listening in, rather ironically, lulls us to sleep.

"It's vital information first, and poetry incidentally," says Soanes – and indeed, 'The Ships', as it is affectionately known, was born out of tragedy. On the night of 25 October 1859, a great storm tore up the Irish Sea. Some 800 people were killed, 133 ships were wrecked, and 90 more were badly damaged. Over 450 of those lost lives resulted from the foundering of the steam clipper *Royal Charter*, which sank off the coast of Anglesey. None of the women and children aboard survived, leading to a public outcry as to why nothing was in place to warn ships of such gales.

The horror wrought by this single storm gives some idea as to the terrible losses at sea before the dawn of weather forecasting – "a fact confirmed," writes Nic Compton in his book *The Shipping Forecast: A Miscellany*, "by the mind-boggling number of wrecks that still litter our shores (including an estimated 6,000 off Cornwall alone)."

Vice-Admiral Robert FitzRoy, former captain of HMS *Beagle*, which took English naturalist Charles Darwin on his first expedition around the world in the 1830s, founded the Met Office in 1854. He had already been devising innovative methods such as the 'Fishery Barometer' to predict the weather, and after the *Royal Charter* Storm immediately dedicated himself to delivering a gale warning service. Through analysing past storms, he demonstrated how their paths could have been predicted using his novel methods. He established a network of stations across the coasts to collect data to be sent to ports by telegraph; at the onset of incoming storms, signals were hoisted to warn ships. FitzRoy's 'weather forecast' – a term he coined – was published daily in the national press from 1861 onwards.

"Not everyone was convinced," reveals radio presenter Paddy O'Connell in *The Shipping Forecast, A Beginner's Guide*, one of the BBC's special programmes made to mark the centenary. Some scientists doubted whether the weather could be predicted in a ▶

***Above:* Waves crash over Newhaven's breakwater in East Sussex during Storm Evert, 2021**

meaningful way at all. "FitzRoy was often ridiculed when predictions went wrong. Budgets were soon slashed. And, four years after that first storm warning, FitzRoy took his own life [in 1865]."

News reports widely attributed his suicide to a breakdown brought on by overwork. It's likely that financial ruin also contributed; such was his dedication that FitzRoy spent the entirety of his personal fortune on public meteorological projects. "His impact should not be underestimated," O'Connell continues. "This was the beginning of attempting to predict the weather, the foundation of the Shipping Forecast." In 2002, the sea area 'Finisterre' (meaning 'the end of the earth') was renamed FitzRoy.

It wasn't until 1911 that forecasts were first sent to ships at sea via telegraph. A decade later, radio broadcasts began, and by 1924 a dedicated service called 'Weather Shipping' was launched, transmitted from London. However, smaller vessels lacked the equipment to receive the signal, prompting the Met Office to turn to the newly established BBC for help. In 1925 the BBC, using a new transmitter in Daventry, Northamptonshire, broadcast on longwave the very first 'morning weather forecast for Farming and Shipping'. The first dedicated 'Shipping Forecast' was to follow later that year, and its format has remained broadly similar ever since.

It's the precise format that makes the Shipping Forecast so instantly recognisable, adopting the same structure every time so as to be as clear as possible for those at sea. The Forecast always begins with a gale warning, then a 'general synopsis' of pressure areas. Then follows, most famously, the detailed area forecast which sees the waters around the British Isles divided into 31 named areas.

For each sea area, there's a forecast of wind direction and force, precipitation and visibility: *Biscay – East becoming cyclonic, 3 to 5. Slight or moderate. Fog patches in south. Moderate or good, occasionally very poor in south.* Forecasts always start with the sea area 'Viking', moving clockwise around Britain to finish up at 'Southeast Iceland', covering more than a million square miles of sea in total. It is broadcast twice a day on the BBC at 5.34 in the morning and 12.48 at night, with additional forecasts on Saturday and Sunday afternoons.

Surprisingly, given the era we live in, little of the process of creating the Shipping Forecast is currently automated. A Duty Meteorologist applies their expertise and knowledge of the weather and seas to move the forecast along every six hours, based on data produced by a supercomputer that processes weather observations from all around the globe. The Met Office certainly doesn't stop for Christmas, operating 365 days a year, producing forecasts around the clock.

"With advances in maritime communications technology, the number of seafarers relying on the BBC's Shipping Forecast has reduced," admits HM Coastguard, the UK's National Maritime Emergency Service. "But its place in the Radio 4 schedules maintains another source for a regulated marine forecast to help keep people safe on the waves." Indeed, it still reaches hundreds of thousands of listeners daily.

Certainly, any changes to the Shipping Forecast proposed by the BBC have always been vehemently opposed. It has won a unique place in the nation's affections for its heroic functionality, saving countless lives; and for its poetic qualities, with its pared-back language and structure and lyrical sea area names.

Perhaps those of us ashore listen as a reminder that we are an island people, surrounded by a sometimes wild, tempestuous sea. But for seafarers and landlubbers alike, this much is for sure: the Shipping Forecast is as constant as a loyal friend – looking out for us and ready to warn whenever the tide may turn.

TUNE IN

The BBC has marked 100 years of the Shipping Forecast with a series of special programmes available online on BBC Sounds, as well as an immersive feature in partnership with the National Maritime Museum: *canvas-story.bbcrewind.co.uk/ships100*

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Across the unsailed seas

On the edge of Britain, Orkney stands apart – a place of wild seas and ancient stones that carry the echoes of an extraordinary past

WORDS **LUKE WATERSON**

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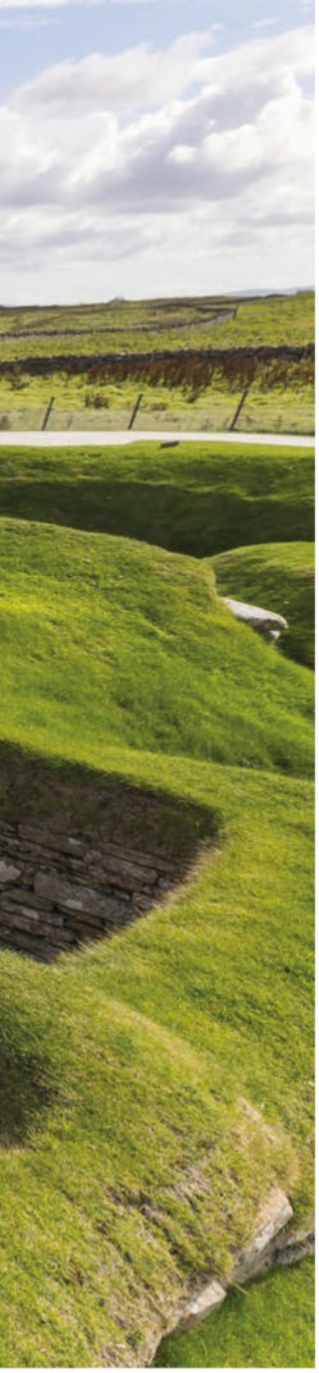

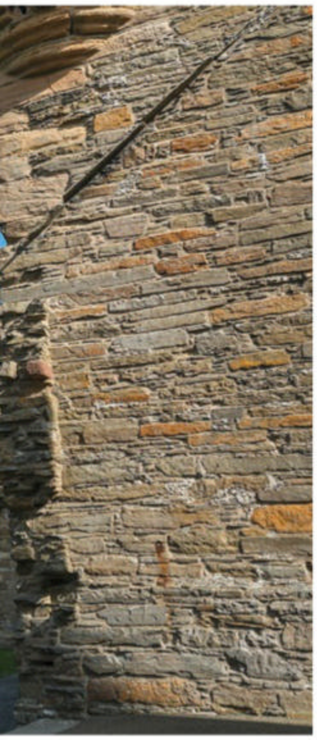

Previous pages: **The Ring of Brodgar stone circle**
Opposite, clockwise from top: **Neolithic dwelling at Skara Brae; the ruined Earl's Palace stands near the Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall; St Magnus Cathedral**

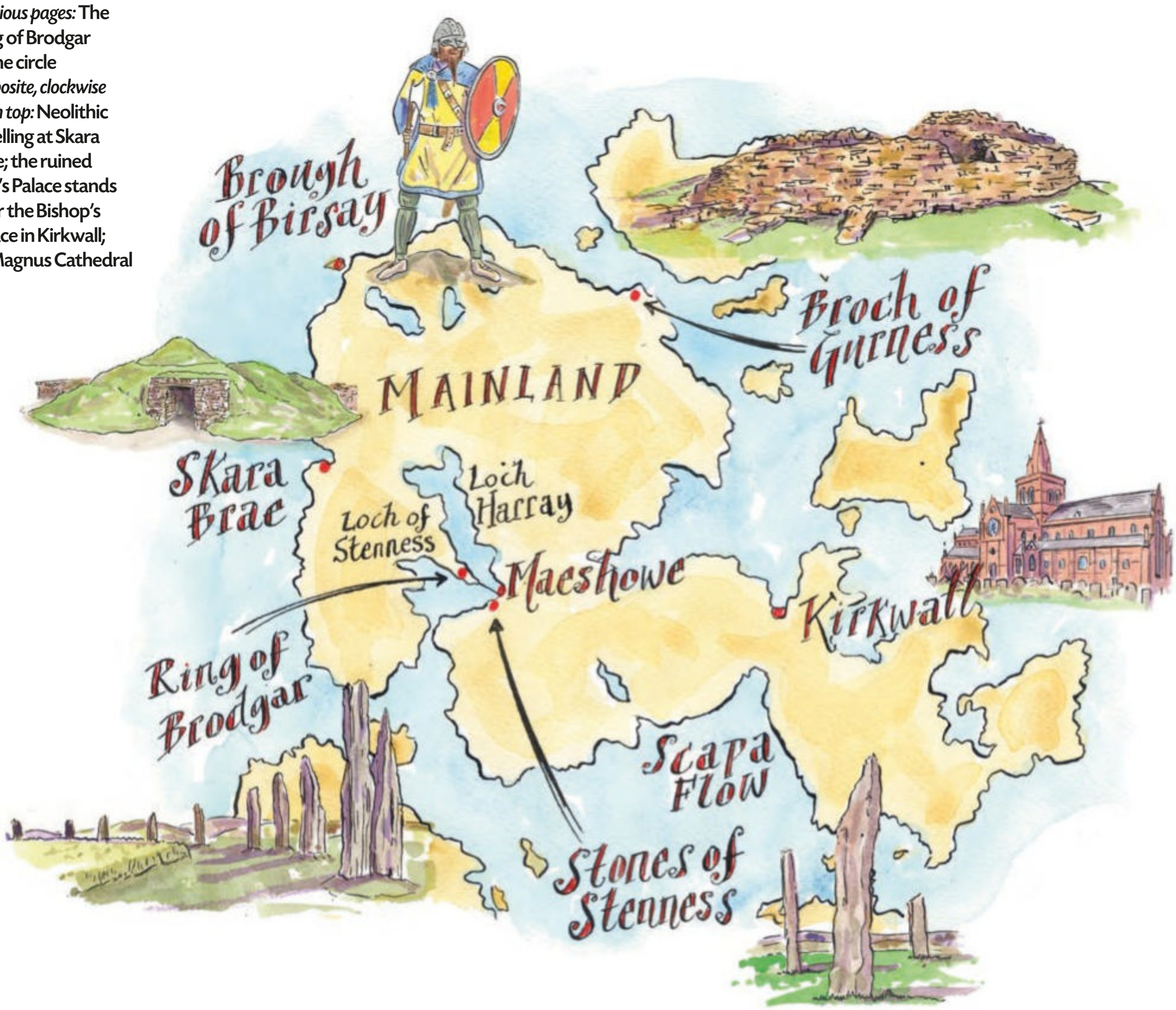

ILLUSTRATION: © MICHAEL A HILL. PHOTOS: © KENNY LAM/VISITSCOTLAND/IAN G DAGNALL/ALAMY

Touch down on the Orkney Islands by plane and it is the fertile farmland, neatly boxed by dykes, or dry-stone walls, that you notice first. Arrive by sea and it's the bustle of capital Kirkwall and its 18th- and 19th-century townhouses that captivate. Either way, after an invariably turbulent crossing – the Pentland Firth separating the archipelago from the northern Scottish mainland is one of the world's roughest straits – the sight of Orkney, going about its business, seemingly in complete independence of the rest of the UK, is a striking one.

Orkney's history has always set it apart, furnishing it with its own proud cultural reference points. Its prehistoric past saw it flourish as a major social and ceremonial centre, the influence of which likely extended across all Neolithic Britain. In the Viking Age it became a bastion of Norse culture, located at a major crossroads of sea travel and trading routes, and it remained a territory of the Kingdom of Norway until 1472. Later it was the hub of the lucrative 18th-century kelp-harvesting industry, and later still, Britain's key naval base during both World Wars.

Orkney attracted attention recently when its council investigated ways to achieve greater autonomy from the UK, too: a move many deemed apt since it was separate from Britain for far longer than it has been part of it. With roots of such renown, it is perhaps not surprising that islanders jokingly dub anyone from the British mainland 'eens fae off' (ones from off).

Kirkwall's historic centre, with its handsome ashlar stone facades, appears Georgian or Victorian, from a time when lairds grown rich through the kelp industry built many of the significant buildings. Yet its heart is Norse. From the harbour, you can trace the thoroughfares of Bridge Street, Albert Street and Broad Street, the narrow, atmospheric high street following the course of the town's former seafront, to reach Kirkwall's crowning glory, St Magnus Cathedral.

Raised in 1137, within living memory of the glory days of the Viking age, the majestic red-and-yellow sandstone Romanesque building remembers Jarl (Earl) Magnus Erlendsson, who was martyred around 1115. Erlendsson was an instrumental figure in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, a medieval narrative recounting the exploits of the archipelago's jarls. Erlendsson's brutal death by axe at the hands of his cousin Haakon, with whom he shared joint rule of Orkney, supposedly spurred a spate of miracles that inspired his nephew Rögnvald Kali Kolsson to build a 'stone minster' to house his uncle's remains. They are still interred in the cathedral today. ▶

PHOTO: © KENNY LAM/VISITSCOTLAND

Orkney was a powerful place millennia before the Vikings arrived in the 8th century

The cathedral is also where Orkney's most talismanic annual event begins: the Ba'. Every Christmas and New Year's Day this mass ball game, involving dozens of townsfolk divided into teams known as the 'Uppies' and the 'Doonies', starts with a 'throw-up' of the Ba' – akin to an old-fashioned leather football – from the cathedral's Mercat Cross. Mayhem ensues as each team aims to get the ball into their goal: a wall near Kirkwall's Catholic church for the Uppies and a dunk of the ball in Kirkwall harbour for the Doonies. Romantics date the game back to the Norse era, despite no record of the Ba' existing before 1650; either way, it certainly makes a vibrant spectacle in wintertime Orkney.

The Bishop's Palace, constructed alongside the cathedral, was where Norse King Haakon IV passed away in 1263, an incident later seen to represent the beginning of the demise of Norse control over the islands. Now ruined, the palace would have been a lavish residence befitting of Orkney's status as one of only 13 bishoprics in all Scotland. Hugging the coast, the buildings would have created an even more imposing impression for those arriving by boat than today: statements in stone of the islands' importance.

Just 15 miles west of Kirkwall lies Stromness, Orkney's second town, a picturesque port of flagstoned streets and stone houses stacked above the harbour. Long a haven for sailors, whalers and traders, it retains a maritime charm, and its waterfront still hints at the days when it was Orkney's gateway to the wider world.

But Orkney was a powerful place millennia before the Vikings arrived in the 8th century. The islands possess one of Europe's highest concentrations of prehistoric monuments. Take the Old Finstown Road west out of Kirkwall as Scapa Flow, the continent's largest natural harbour and Britain's chief wartime naval base, leads you towards Orkney's most celebrated prehistoric sites.

After 10 miles you reach Maeshowe, among the grandest Neolithic constructions still standing in northwest Europe. This gigantic, chambered cairn boasts a long passageway that leads to a quadrangular burial chamber connected to several side-cells. Its magnificence lies in how similar it remains to when it was built, around 2800 BC. Stoop to make your way along 30ft of low corridor to a main chamber – aligned so that the setting sunlight hits the back wall around the time of the winter solstice – and marvel at the largest collection of runes outside Scandinavia, carved after a Norseman broke into the tomb seeking shelter in the 12th century. It's impossible not to feel awe at the site's evident importance over some five millennia.

Maeshowe marks your entrance point to the UNESCO World Heritage Site known as the Heart of Neolithic Orkney. This also comprises nearby mighty menhirs the Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar stone circle, and Neolithic village Skara Brae.

The Stones of Stenness and Ring of Brodgar sit on an isthmus between the freshwater Loch of Harray and brackish Loch of Stenness, a position of clear significance to their Neolithic builders. Between the ▶

Above: **The picturesque harbour at Stromness**

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> **It is 175 years since Skara Brae, Europe's best-preserved Neolithic village, was first discovered following a dramatic storm**

Above: Broch of Gurness, on the East Mainland

two, recent archeological digs at the Ness of Brodgar revealed a further group of structures that cast new light on how Neolithic peoples lived. The Ness's buildings had slate roofs and Northern Europe's earliest known painted walls. The oldest examples of the painted grooved-ware ceramics that have been found across the UK were unearthed here too, suggesting Orkney once commanded cultural influence across Britain.

It is now 175 years since Skara Brae, Western Europe's best-preserved Neolithic village, was first discovered, exposed following a dramatic storm. The nine dwellings set dramatically against Orkney's wild western shoreline here have survived since about 3180 BC – rendering them more venerable than Stonehenge or the Pyramids of Giza.

Circular and built into the ground with packed earth dams for insulation, Skara Brae's buildings provide more fascinating insights into Neolithic society. Although this was a simple farming community, the houses have impeccable flagstone stonework, hearths, box beds, stone dressers and, in certain cases, what are thought to have been toilets feeding into a sewage system: features many houses built in Britain in the 20th century lacked. You can visit adjacent 400-year-old Skaill House, Orkney's grandest mansion, on the same entrance ticket.

From Skaill Bay, the most intriguing loop back to Kirkwall continues clockwise around the coast of Orkney's 'Mainland' (main island). Just getting to the tempestuous Brough of Birsay, on the north coast, is an adventure – it's a tidal island reached via causeway – and remnants of a Norse settlement, overlaying an earlier Pictish one, bear witness to the fact that this was once the island's seat of power.

The East Mainland's standout sight, meanwhile, is the Broch of Gurness. Brochs are perhaps Scotland's most unique constructions. Five hundred of these dry-stone Iron Age towers are dispersed across the Highlands and islands, but Orkney's brochs are different: not stand-alone structures as elsewhere but incorporated within sizeable communities. In use as an Iron Age village, as a farmstead thereafter and later still as a Norse burial site, the Broch of Gurness is another Orkney site built well enough – and revered enough – to have been important to many societies over many eras.

Why, one might ask, do so many of Orkney's ancient sites remain, despite the ravages of some of Britain's most inhospitable weather? Perhaps because of the sheer quantity that once existed. Most of us perceive Orkney today as a far-flung, beyond-the-crowds destination: an impression dating to at least AD 561 when Scottish missionary St Columba referred to the archipelago as "a remote place across the unsailed seas". But a journey around Orkney's mainland clearly shows that there were long periods of history when this was a centre of huge cultural clout within Britain. At times, it may well have been *the* centre – alive with vibrant events that were retold and reimagined by its story-loving population, spun out over and over again, and echoing still through the centuries. B

THE PLANNER

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Direct flights to Kirkwall leave at least once daily from Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Inverness, Dundee and Shetland (45min–1hr). Car ferries go from Aberdeen to Kirkwall (6hr) three times weekly, and from Scrabster near Thurso to Stromness twice daily during winter (1hr 30min). *loganair.co.uk; northlinkferries.co.uk*

WHERE TO STAY

The Kirkwall Hotel stands on the historic Kirkwall harbourfront, dating back to 1890; most of the 37 rooms have harbour views. Merkister Hotel, in its own grounds on the shores of the Loch of Harray, has a central location perfect for forays out to the Ness of Brodgar, Ring of Brodgar, Skara Brae and Broch of Gurness. *kirkwallhotel.com; merkister.com*

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

The Foveran, a smart restaurant-with-rooms whose large windows overlook the green fields flanking Scapa Flow, showcases the island's standout ingredients of seafood, lamb, beef and cheese; book in advance. Remote Birsay Bay Tearoom on North Mainland serves stellar sandwiches, soups, cakes and other baked treats. *thefoveran.com; birsaybaytearoom.co.uk*

FURTHER INFORMATION

orkney.com

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A day with...
TOM ALLAN

Thatched roofs have been a feature of rural Britain for 5,000 years. We meet the thatcher who gave up city life to master this ancient craft

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in a remote house in the Scottish Borders. It was a mile to the nearest house, and 10 miles to the nearest town, where I went to school. I spent most of my childhood playing outside – climbing trees, guddling in the burns and rivers and building dens. This gave me a lifelong connection to the natural world, and also to natural materials.

How did you get into thatching?

Entirely by chance. After studying English at university and working for a few years for an art book publisher in London, I decided to quit my job and try to find some work in the countryside. A few months into a traineeship with the National Trust in Devon, I heard on the grapevine that a local thatcher needed an apprentice. I knew nothing about thatching at this point, but something about this archaic-seeming trade intrigued me. I called up the thatcher, did a trial day with him and his father-in-law, and a few weeks later started my thatching apprenticeship. That was in 2012. I have been thatching ever since.

How long does it take to thatch a roof?

Anything from a week or two to several months. Thatching is a very labour intensive, manual process – every strand of reed or straw on the roof goes through the hands of at least one thatcher before being secured onto the roof.

What was your most memorable building?

One of the most memorable was an old black house on the west coast of South Uist in the Western Isles of Scotland. It was late October; there were gales, golden sunsets and sea eagles calling over the white sand beach by the house.

Do you work all over the country?

The majority of my work is in South Devon, either in the south hams or Dartmoor. I usually do one job a year in Scotland where I grew up, as there is a shortage of thatchers there.

The style of thatching varies hugely across the nation, and that is one of the things I like most about the craft. In Devon the roofs tend to have a rounded shape, and our ridges are relatively simple. In the east of England, roofs are angular with straight lines and sharp corners, and the ridges can be very ornate. In the Scottish Highlands, wild plants like heather and marram grass are still used on a few buildings.

What's your favourite area to work in?

I am lucky enough to work in some very beautiful places. The Western Isles of Scotland is hard to beat though – so long as the weather cooperates, which is by no means guaranteed! And of course South Devon, where I live – I could be thatching by a creek lined with oak woodland, or on a headland overlooking the Atlantic, or on a windswept shoulder of Dartmoor.

What are the challenges?

You have to make your peace with working outside in all weathers, at all times of year. That could be in a July heatwave or a February snowstorm. You have to be OK with work that is often physically hard, dirty and sometimes repetitive. On an industry-wide level, there are sometimes problems securing the materials we need to thatch with – for example, the 2024 wheat harvest was a disaster because of very wet growing conditions, and a wet harvest.

And your favourite things about the job?

I love the sense of connection it gives us to the past: when thatching a 500-year-old farmhouse in Devon, it's impossible not to be aware of that history, and to feel that you are just the latest link in a chain of a craftsmen that goes back centuries. I think making a roof out of a marshland weed is environmentally sound. And I love the way a thatched roof adds to and can even define the character of a particular place. Devon would not be Devon without thatch.

What's the future for this ancient craft?

Sometimes I feel very optimistic about the future of thatching, other times less so. There are problems getting young people into the trade, and in some parts of Britain, like Scotland and Wales, the craft is in a precarious position, with a tiny number of working thatchers still holding the traditional knowledge in their hands. But elsewhere, there are bright spots. Social media is making a new generation of young people aware of the craft, and there are young, enthusiastic people picking up a thatching leggett for the first time. .

I take comfort from the fact that people have been saying there's no future for thatching for 200 years, if not longer – and we're still here, we're still thatching.

Tom Allan's book, On the Roof, *is published by Profile (£10.99).*

> "I love the way a thatched roof adds to and can even define the character of a place"

PHOTOS: © TOM ALLAN/JOHN HERSEY

STORIES
FROM
HOME

Ashby Manor House

This ancient manor was the site of one of England's most notorious acts of treason: the Gunpowder Plot

WORDS **ELEANOR DOUGHTY**

Nova Guest laughs as she remembers the first time she saw Ashby Manor House, near Rugby. Away on an anniversary trip with her future husband, "we drove up to this house with these beautiful Lutyens gates and I was just speechless." Ashby belonged then to Ivor Guest, 4th Viscount Wimborne. "It was amazing," she says. "I thought, 'this is obviously an important house.' I remember feeling like I was in the kind of house I'd never been in before – somewhere so old, with so much history."

Nova's sense of historical importance was well placed. The Catesby family acquired Ashby in 1375 and it was in their hands when in 1605, in a small wood-panelled room above the gatehouse – now called the Plot Room – a group of conspirators met to discuss the Gunpowder Plot. "We miss all of that in Australian history lessons," Nova, who grew up in Perth, says. "It was all explained to me that first night, but the real significance of it has taken me years to understand."

> "We've had to do it from scratch and source everything. That creates a total commitment"

The Honourable Ivor Guest, later 1st Viscount Wimborne, bought Ashby from the Senhouse family in 1903, and soon after commissioned the architect Edwin Lutyens to transform the house inside and out. Delighted with their new home, the Guests filled their visitors' book with names of the great, the good and the glamorous, and hosted the Prince of Wales in 1921. After Ivor died in 1939, the house passed through the family before in 1976 Ivor Guest, 3rd Viscount Wimborne, sold Ashby to the British Airways Pensions Fund. In 1998, his son, also called Ivor, happened upon Ashby and bought it back. Having restored it, in 2015 he sold the house to his cousin and his wife Nova, who have lived there ever since.

Every big house has its challenges, but Ashby's is unusual. "It's a difficult house to be immediately comfortable in," says Nova. "The challenge has been furnishing it in a way that makes it right for family life in this century. Everything I've done in the house has been about comfort, and I don't think anyone had ever done that before." The lovely south-facing Lutyens hall, she says, had "never had a comfortable chair in it" before they arrived.

Ashby is not the kind of house that can easily be opened to the public, but the Guests encourage school groups to come and learn more about its history. Next year, they plan to join the National Garden Scheme and open the garden. One of Nova's plans is, in time, to restore the 16th-century gardener's cottage within the walled garden. "I don't do all of these things because I can't wait to use them myself, but because when we have weddings, everyone will get so much from them – and the building will be singing and happy again."

Although Ashby has only been in their branch of the family for a decade, the Guests are devoted to it. "We've had to do it from scratch and source everything," says Nova. "That creates a total commitment. I couldn't possibly just walk away from it. We're on a journey and we're all in." B

ashbymanorhouse.com

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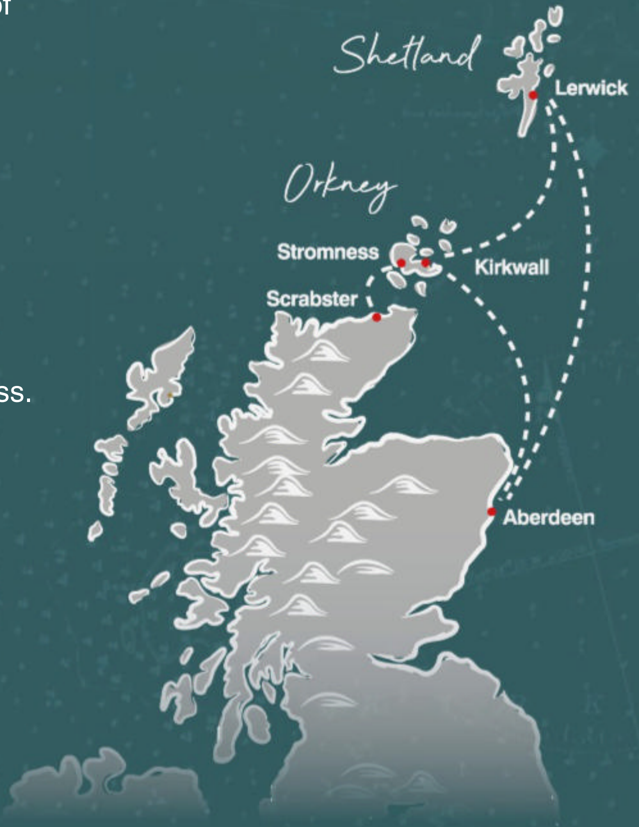
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